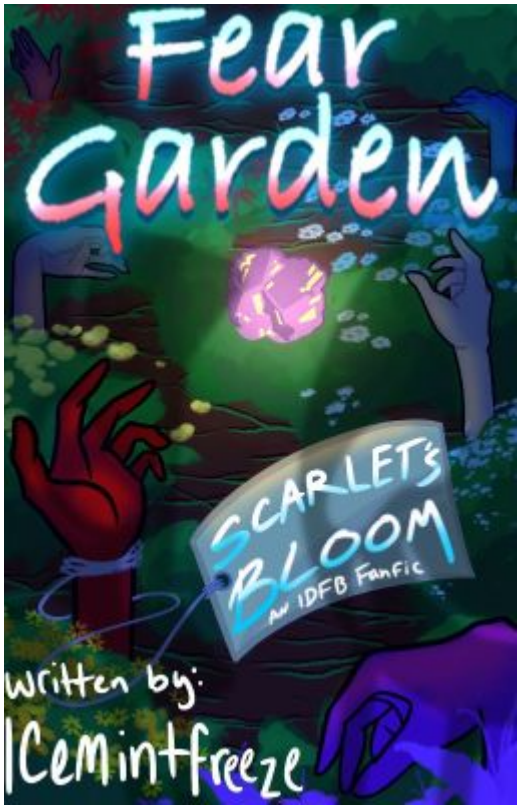
Fear Garden
SCARLET'S BLOOM
An IDFB Fanfic
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So... You chose her.

You chose all of them... over me. And you thought they would pull you right up!

How adorable.

....I told you what would happen if you went against my word.

And you never believed me.

But guess what.

This is only the beginning, my friend. The future holds so many opportunities- golden doors that call our name towards its path.

I was that door for you. You discovered so much about yourself, all thanks to me. But you still chose to try and leave.

Your garden...? Please. We never had the chance to enjoy it- to bask in its glory, and take in nature's gift for ourselves.

How unfortunate.

....

It's only a matter of time now.

I can see them all. Working. Breaking. Punching the many walls that keep them trapped. Such a variety of objects... why, I can see them all now- perfect for the garden we had made.

Too bad you won't get the chance to meet them! You saw how they let you go-

How they threw you out, like you were nothing.

...I suppose I'm the last to do so. It was truly fun while it lasted- I mean that now. But you gave up- and because of you, we are here. Together.

I refuse to fail again. I see it now. I still have a chance.

But this won't be the last you hear of me- besides. They're all still here.

And thanks to you... I at least found a vessel of someone so much stronger.

I will finish what I have started.

Good luck.... Pin.

A claw of the damned sprouted through the soils above.

The Machine

The songs of the wind lead the dance of the snowflakes above.

Winter solstice was finally here. Clouds stretched endlessly across the skies of Yoyle City, and snowflakes twinkled in the atmosphere as they sprinkled down to the grounds below. A city, once abandoned, was now buzzing with energy and interest, with a multitude of objects now roaming freely after their imprisonment in the Tiny Loser Chamber. Their curiosity had no boundaries; they explored day and night, wanting to find the answers to the many questions that they carried with them.

The Yoyle Needy, piercing through the air, now gathered a thin layer of snow that accumulated over its surface. A cage, now abandoned, hung from the patio above, swinging back and forth, as if the winds were attempting to snatch it itself.

How emblematic.

For there is such a beauty that hid within each crevice of every abandoned building in the city, carrying the secrets of the population that had once resided there. But its history was now tainted, clutching the screams and blood of those who had died there in its grasp. And because of this, a new normal had dawned upon it.

A group of four, known as Pen, Eraser, Blocky, and Snowball, walked through the frigid air. Donut held Barfbag's hand, quietly sitting outside as they watched as familiar faces would embrace the freedom before them. Taco tossed a snowball to the side, and Lollipop watched her curiously, listening to the woman as she shared the thoughts of her mind. Many objects were going about their day, with the impending storm not keeping them at bay.

But soon, many would begin to pour into the laboratory. Many were curious; others were horrified, carrying the terror that had been

awakened from the views they had come across. But any and all realizations would soon be answered- all thanks to the brilliant minds that had worked in the labs below.

As Grassy was quietly playing with a stack of dominos, Robot Flower would step over, carefully scooping him into her arms. There was a struggle, but this was no surprise- she handed him a puffer string ball, watching as he excitedly began to squeeze and shake it. With him now distracted, the robot would then walk towards her best friend, giving her the nod of reassurance as she now had the youngest distracted. Basketball would look up, and she would smile, letting her carry Grassy to a spare room to shield him from what would take place.

She couldn't let him watch their return.

Basketball would lift the goggles from her eyes. She carefully stepped up, brushing herself off before she would turn to face the growing crowd before her.

"You know that they won't answer anything, do you?" She said, keeping her voice low.

Agreements. Some nodded- others glanced towards each other hesitantly.

"Do you think it's going to work?" Bell asked nervously.

"The machine was nearly complete. I found a way to fix those broken parts- some of the missing machinery were things Robot Flower gathered for me."

"But what if it goes wrong?"

"It won't- I know it. This is going to work."

"It BETTER." Fanny scowled, her eyes narrowing towards the orange sports ball. The outburst caused Bracelety to flinch, sadly glancing away as she nervously fiddled with her fingers.

Poor thing, Basketball thought to herself. The dark circles under her angered eyes carried an unfathomable weight- and Bracelety? Her

silent demeanor was nothing short of strange to who she was.

It told the scientist everything she needed to know.

Ever since they had broken out, they went off to find them. They had sworn to do so, ever since the first day they had met. Not even the walls of the Locker of Losers could separate the bond of the four- after all, soulmates always tend to find a way back to one another. Once that first ray of sunlight poured into the metal box, their minds had been set; finding Bubble and Ice Cube was a goal they refused to put off.

But she knew that they did.

They found what they were looking for.

But the darkness that clouded their eyes was enough to tell her that it was nothing short of agonizing.

Basketball adjusted the machine's screen, her reflection soon catching her eye. The sportsball did have her doubts- what if this didn't work? What if it was all in vain?

There was so much that could go wrong, and the chance they could never recover again loomed over them all.

Would this be it?

...

Well. It was better to try and fail, than to never try at all.

Holding her breath, Basketball turned to face the newly-built, hand-powered recovery center.

They all decided who'd be the first to return. It was more so a decision that Basketball made final- in order to make an understanding of the mess that awaited them.

She began to type out the letters.

She remembered hearing his voice. The concern, the panic, the stress-

oh, she could only hope that he could come to his senses; to give them a glimpse of what they couldn't see.

T.

E.

N.

N.

I.

S.

B.

A.

L.

L.

With each press of the buttons, a wacky noise filled the room. For a split second, Basketball stared at the pulsating green button before her, holding her breath before she finally slammed against it.

Ding.

The unfamiliarity...

What happened to the-...

Oh..

The harsh rays from the fluorescent lights burned through the scientist's eyelids. Almost immediately, his face scrunched up in disturbance, as he shakily began to turn to his side- that is, before his eyes slowly peeled open. It took a few blinks for him to readjust- but the mental fog that clouded his brain kept him from reacting to the world around him.

He was asleep.

It felt like he was asleep.

A sense of peace that lulled him from before.

But what was before...

Before... all he could remember was the haze. The sounds of the people he knew, the voice of the one he had come to love. The light, the warmth, the breeze of a summers day. It was too strange for him to understand how he should feel about it.

Yet, a sense of dread slowly began to seep through his veins.

It...

"Tennis Ball?"

The voice pierced through his head like the end of an arrow. In an instant, his eyes shot open, and the haze that blocked his vision burned at the light that touched his soul.

It shattered the barrier that his mind had kept, and in an instant, the memories began to flood his mind, crashing away the final bits of ease that he carried with him.

Yoyle City.

Golfball.

Firey.

Then Rocky.

Then Woody.

Everyone.

The bodies of familiar faces,

Their hands *missing*,

Golfball.

Golfball...

Her skull,

Red...

Pin.

Pin.

PIN.

And that's when the peace ended, as a scream of terror escaped his throat.

1-13-20XX

The recovery center is back and running. All the materials that were listed were found (Robot Flower, you are a miracle on Earth!).

TB asks that these notes stay stored in the database- any long term recovery effects will be stored here, as we begin the recovery of the BFDIA contestants who died months ago.

Let the recovery observation begin.

TIME: 9:32 AM

RECOVEREE: TENNIS BALL

PHYSICAL STATUS: Disheveled. A faint scar is noted on his back- trailing down the spinal cord.

NOTES: He woke up- thankfully. I thought he was fine- but then he started screaming. I haven't heard him scream like that- not even as a kid. But we- I got him to calm down.

He wouldn't stop shaking. As much as it ate away at me, I couldn't

just ask him what was happening. I did a few physical checks, vitals were high but all was steady.

He didn't speak at all. Everyone was yelling at us- well, at him- to say something and prove that he was alright. We almost had to remove Fanny from the room with the threats she made.

Not too long after, the name "Golfball" broke from his lips.

RECOVERY: SUCCESSFUL.

TIME: 9:59 AM

RECOVEREE: GOLFBALL

PHYSICAL STATUS: Pale crack noted, from her forehead to her center skull.

NOTES: A complete opposite of Tennis Ball. She woke in silence, a little dazed as to what took place. It seemed as if she was having trouble regaining herself, since attempts at talking to her weren't going very successfully. It was around here that I thought the recovery machine had malfunctioned- until TB stepped in. I almost stopped him, but he hugged Golfball as tightly as he could, and this was enough to make her return in the blink of an eye. The two spoke to one another, a transcript is attached below.

TRANSLATION *RECORDING IN PROGRESS*

TB: Hey- look at me. Look, it's ok.

GB: ...

TB: GB- please- it's me- you're okay..

GB: ..TB..?

TB: GB..

GB: ..is.. is this..

TB: We're back.. we're back- and we're safe..

[They embrace. Golfball hides her face in her partner's chest, before she blinks.]

GB: ...why... is everyone.. in my lab.

TRANSLATION CONCLUDED

RECOVERY: SUCCESSFUL.

Note to self: NO ERRORS HAVE BEEN FOUND. Golfball is... quite adamant in having her lab to herself and TB. She was angry at everyone, but it was short-lived, thanking me for fixing everything.

She never expresses gratitude to anyone this way.

What did she go through?

TIME: 10:27 AM

RECOVEREE: ROCKY

PHYSICAL STATUS: Faint forehead scar, about 2.2 inches long (upper forehead to the center between his eyes).

IMPORTANT: A test of the recovery process for children. Both Tennis Ball and Golfball had requested him to be next- which I let them do. I remember that name faintly- mainly when Tennis Ball had visited the TLC to ask if we had heard him wandering around.

And ever since that day, I always held Grassy a little closer.

The crowd, of course, still stared with great curiosity, as they were still wondering if the machine was truly safe to use; some familiar Locker mates spoke about Rocky for a moment. I never knew Rocky myself, so after typing in the name, I stepped back and let the two take care of the situation.

NOTES: He fell from the recovery center in silence. I was told he often smiled, but he stared into dead air with a frown on his face, not moving, not looking, nothing. Immediately, I was concerned that something went wrong, until both scientists stepped forward.

Tennis Ball was the first to speak. He cleared his throat- to no avail, but Golfball gave him a nudge, gently bringing him closer to the child.

"Rocky?" Tennis Ball croaked.

Success. With a few blinks, Rocky would carefully look up at the two. But the dewiness in his eyes was enough to tell me that his childhood innocence had been permanently twisted beyond repair.

I could tell GB noticed this; her face dropped with such sorrow. But TB powered through it, and he cracked a soft, reassuring smile, carefully kneeling down to his level. The next moment felt like hours- watching the two exchange hidden words of comfort through one another's eyes, until Rocky opened his mouth.

"It really hurt."

Such a softness in his voice, that was strained with an experience I couldn't ever imagine. It's hard to write; TB embracing Rocky, letting him cry into his chest as GB also comforted the two quietly.

I don't think I can continue anymore.

This concludes the observation log.

Wiping her tears, Basketball carefully closed the logbook, turning back to face the original owners of the underground laboratory. She was hesitant to interrupt the melancholic scene before her, but with the recovery center being proved a success, they now had 19 objects who awaited the recovery process.

And the order in which they would be recovered? Oh, she was worried it would evolve into a fight.

But it pained the sports ball; Rocky didn't even have the strength to cry, as he was sinking into Tennis Ball's comforting hold. He was curling up desperately, wanting to try and shrink into the safety of his big brother's hold and away from the reality that awaited him. Yet, Basketball gathered the remaining strength she had, carefully stepping forward and clearing her throat.

"The recovery center works." She began, her voice hushed. "All the tests have shown up clear- and, I think we're ready to bring everyone back."

Golfball squinted, attempting to make out Basketball's face as she carefully stepped back onto her feet.

"We're going to have to build more than one. Do you still have my blueprints?"

"How could I not?"

"Good." Sighing, Golfball turned back around, only to face the crowd that observed the four quietly. Her eyes narrowed, almost out of annoyance- but she was terribly drained from everything that she had

to endure, there was no way she could try to put up an argument now.

And this was the same for those who watched. Blocky was on the verge of cracking a few jokes about the infamous bossy-bot, as it had been too long since he had interacted with the science duo. But after seeing just how broken Tennis Ball was after his recovery, the urge to try and mess around was immediately shut down.

He may not have been around to get a good look at the life they had to endure outside of those walls. But he didn't want to take any risks to try and ask.

While Basketball was carefully adjusting a piece of the recovery center, Golfball would walk over to her, turning her head to face the keyboard that was plastered on the invention. She raised her eyebrow.

"Did you two decide?" She asked, keeping her voice as calm as she could.

Golfball nodded, her eyes closed before she looked up at her.

"Yes." She murmured, "And we're not taking any chances."

"What do you mean?"

"Out of- everyone we were with... we have no idea what kind of state they'll be in. We want to choose someone who may have their head still attached to their shoulders here- someone who can lead us down to the very last few."

"...And that is..."

"Just help me type." GB snapped.

Jeez, Basketball thought to herself. She walked to her side, and readied herself as she listened to Golfball spell the name of another fallen comrade.

F-R-I-E-S.

Welcome Home

The strange buzzing and clicking sang like a chorus from the heavens above. The two scientists watched with ease, as the machine carefully recovered the contestant that they had been familiar with. That striking red hue caught their eyes, as he plopped on the ground, immediately grunting from the impact.

Well, that was a first. The first three gave no reaction during their initial recovery- but Fries was conscious, carefully adjusting himself as he stared at the ground below.

No wonder they chose him. He seemed strong- already pushing through the haze of being brought back to life. But nobody wanted to make any assumptions just yet, as his eyes suddenly darkened as he lifted his head.

Nobody could describe the expression they saw on his face. Fries glanced around, carefully standing back on his feet.

"...Is this.." His voice was low, almost careful, as if he were afraid of gaining the attention of something... or, well, someone... he didn't want to see.

Just the way he was standing was enough to send a twinge of worry down Eraser's spine- he had never seen him in such a state before. This didn't last too long, as Fries immediately lifted his head up, gazing across the familiar faces that he had met once before.

He couldn't break now- not ever.

He needed to stay strong.

Golfball would approach him, collecting herself as she nodded.

"You're back, Fries. We're safe."

"B-But- we were- I was- the recovery centers..."

"...They brought them back. They fixed them."

The words immediately clicked in Fries' mind. Golfball turned to face the crowd to at least address their concerns, but the breath was knocked out of her, as Fries immediately rushed past her, making it to the keyboard.

The instructions rang clear in her head. Revive Fries, and move the way down to the Freesmarters. If both Golfball and Tennis Ball had woken up with the terror that stabbed through their very minds, they couldn't fathom just how shattered the final few survivors were.

But to Fries, the fact that the recovery center was back was beyond tempting, as he immediately realized that he could get them back. He didn't want to waste anymore time while he was alive- for tater's sake, he didn't know if the recovery center could give in once more, leaving them all at the hands of death itself.

Ignoring the furious glare that Golfball shot at him, Fries immediately typed away.

P-U-F-F-B-A-L-L.

He held his breath. Even as the smaller object tried to headbut him to the side, he stood his ground, clenching his fists with anticipation while the machine did its work.

And less than a minute later, there she was. The familiar pink hue from her body made Fries' heart skip a beat, as he watched her carefully slip to the ground below.

After everything.

After the hell that they had to endure- the guilt that clawed at his very spirit, and ate away at the will that he had to continue fighting.

That pain all washed away, as his arms began to tremble, watching those multicolored eyes of hers carefully open.

Those eyes he had fallen in love with so long ago, that familiar glimmer of life now twinkling within them.

She was here.

She was alive again.

And Fries had to bite back the urge to run to her, to scoop her close to himself, and never let anything, or anyone, hurt her again.

But he refused.

The others watched, as Fries carefully stepped over to the pink object that was on the floor. She showed no reaction to returning once more, and this confused the few objects to no end.

She knew how to fly, didn't she?

Why was she on the ground like that?

Despite how badly his hands trembled, Fries reached over, placing a gentle hand on his lover's cheek. The endless hurricane of questions stormed through his aching mind, but he mustered up the strength to turn that chaos dark.

"Puffball.." Fries whispered, his thumb caressing the gentle fluff that graced his lover's cheek. He couldn't realize just how broken his voice had become, with the weight of before pulling him down.

It brought tears to many of those in the room.

Blinking, Puffball's colorful pupils carefully lifted themselves, and locked with the familiar golden hue of her dearest boyfriend. His gaze, which forever brought her such joy and ease, striked through her heart with the realization that she had returned.

And this brought such sorrow to the poor woman, as her lip quivered, those striking eyes of hers now filling to the brim with tears.

"...It.. can't be.." She whined out, her voice just as hushed as her lovers. This broke the poor man's heart in two, as his stiffness had shattered from the mere sound of her.

His lover. His dearest- she was safe once more.

Grimacing, Fries scooped Puffball into his arms, letting the tears slip down his face as he clutched her close to his aching heart. The strength it took him to hold back the sobs was a battle he was on the verge of losing- as even now, he still couldn't believe what had taken place on that horrifying day. But when he began to hear the quiet sniffling below- oh, he had to close his eyes.

His soul ached with guilt. He never forgave himself for leaving his family behind- and he swore, with his new chance at life, he would never leave them again.

As the two held each other tightly, their souls intertwining with the beat of their hearts, Tennis Ball would walk over to the two, frowning.

"Cmon'. We have to bring everyone back."

A murmur. Tennis Ball pouted, not being able to understand what Fries had said in response- but not wanting to fight, he looked down.

"What was that?"

"My son." Fries stipulated, gently clutching Puffball closer. "You're missing my son."

Oh.

Worriedly, Tennis Ball glanced over towards Golfball and Basketball, unsure of what to do now. They had hoped to try and keep this entire process smooth and simple, not wanting this very situation to happen this way.

But now, the two did not care. Basketball glanced down, frowning as Golfball was holding Rocky as gently as possible, easing the trembling that came from his body. There was a demand for order, of course- especially when it came to the recovery of everyone they had come to know- but she succumbed to the exhaustion that tugged at her mind, giving him a simple nod in response.

Well, there was no arguing with that now, was there.

Tennis Ball carefully helped Fries up, letting him make his way towards the others as he turned right back to the keyboard.

G-E-L-A-T-I-N.

Seeing the green jello drop from the machine, the objects from the Loser Chamber would watch the recovery of the crew progress. Some had to admit that it did feel weird to be here- after all, this was something that was so tender to object kind, there should be some kind of privacy as it goes on.

But curiosity kept them in that lab. The stories that they had heard- the views that were rumored to have exist- they needed to know if it was true. The horrifying secrets that had been passed back and forth were enough to persuade almost ANYBODY to try and find the missing pieces of this puzzle. And this especially counted for a familiar purple lollipop, who observed the scene with a keen eye.

She watched silently, her eyes locked onto the green object as he returned from his ethereal unconsciousness. There was a hesitation that stuck out from him, as he was carefully sitting up to try and understand what had just happened. Surely, it was the recovery burn- how couldn't it be?

They had been dead for months. How long? Why- they couldn't remember.

What struck Lollipop most, was how Gelatin would look down, his eyes suddenly widening at the sight of his hands. The faint scar that wrung around his wrists stood out like a sore thumb- and it was clear that he knew it too, as he was slowly holding one of his wrists, his hand hanging limply underneath.

Wait- his, hand...?

He lost it.. He swore- he- he FELT how-

....

This- this was real, was it...?

Gelatin blinked, watching as his fingers would curl and twitch like the wings of a butterfly. He would carefully wave his hands in front of his eyes, a bewilderment shining within them, almost as if he had never seen them before.

Such a small moment made Lollipop's chest ache- it nearly caught her off guard, as she placed a hand over her own beating heart. A part of her didn't want to believe the rumors that traveled between the others- a garden of hands? A murderer?? What kind of demented being would do such a thing..?

It was just a horror story- it couldn't have been real.

But these doubts had been shattered, as she watched Gelatin testing the movements of his hands. He balled them into fists, before letting them unfurl- he poked each finger out, one by one, before slowly bringing them back to the palm of his hand, feeling the movements that silently reassured his questioning mind.

This continued on for a few more seconds, before the interest had shifted, moving away from his own hands, to the objects that were standing near his very being. It didn't take him long to see Fries standing across from him, and as soon as he recognized who that man was- alongside the memories they had shared together- his mouth wobbled, as he tried to speak.

"Fries...?"

Nothing had broken him; he refused to let anything try and bring out a different side in him. But the moment Gelatin's voice rang in his ears, the strength he had to hold himself together immediately vanished.

There wasn't a single object who had seen this man cry before. So when the sob escaped Fries' mouth, it sent shockwaves through the hearts of those who watched. Even those who were more brute than others had to turn away from the scene, as Fries opened his arms towards Gelatin, letting the smaller object sprint into the comforting shield of his embrace.

Reunions were supposed to be sweet. They were supposed to be a reminder that, no matter what, something or someone would always be waiting for you on the other side. It was supposed to bring a sense of joy, a wave of relief that relinquishes the thorny vines of anxiety from the mind.

If that's how it's supposed to be- then why, oh why, did it hurt so much.

F-I-R-E-Y.

"The first to go, huh..." Blocky murmured to himself, watching as Tennis Ball pressed the "GO" button on the machine. "I wonder how he's going to handle it..."

"Who knows. It's like a gumball machine- except all the flavors are a different type of trauma..."

At that moment, all eyes turned to face Pen. And in each gaze, they all carried a message that rang out in unison:

What the fuck.

Thankfully, this tense moment was short-lived, as the room suddenly illuminated with a familiar orange hue. And not just this, but that familiar scream immediately returned to the air of Yoyle City, as Firey tumbled onto the tiled floor of the lab.

Never in their lifetime did they expect to miss the sound of Firey's scream.

It even brought tears to the eyes of those who had been revived, easing themselves into the reality that they had now returned to.

His screams would immediately stop, as Firey's eyes revealed the floor beneath him, his hands kissing against the cold surface and the grooves that traced its patterns. Confusion turned to ease, when he realized that he was no longer in the air, but instead, safely on the ground, where he would stay.

"I-.. wasn't I just- falling..?" Firey stuttered, carefully stepping back on his feet, averting the eyes of the crowd before him. "What's going on..?"

Silence. That is, until Tennis Ball let his eyes shoot a glance towards the flame, somewhat looking at him up and down, before he spoke.

"You've been recovered, and after a good while too... Basketball did say that this could have some effect on your memory- since you were gone for so long.."

"It was just- I was helped out of the cage... but... I fell... I mean- she made me fall... wasn't it-.."

And, there it was. Firey had answered his own question, much to Tennis Ball's attempt to help.

He was so sure that he would have the same reaction that they had- the screaming, the silence, the haze that kept them from remembering anything and everything that had taken place countless months ago.

To his surprise, Firey instead turned towards the recovery center, with concern radiating from the look on his face. Tennis Ball was, at first, confused as to what he was doing. At least, until he spoke.

"Pin." His voice trembled. "Is she gone."

Pin.

Oh, that name. It stabbed through Tennis Ball's skull- the mere mention causing him to grimace, biting back the urge to snap at the

flame. He knew that Firey didn't mean to come off that way, as he was the first who had fallen victim to her wicked ways.

But this was unexpected. How could the name bring such a reaction to him? Not just him- he could catch Golfball in the corner of his eyes. A mere glimpse caught the sudden clench of her teeth, as she silently comforted Rocky, who was now hiding within her hold.

Fries? Oh, don't get the three started. Hearing the name made him clutch his family tighter, his arms quivering with, what he assumed, fear. His eyes were locked onto the ground, making it hard for Tennis Ball to try and figure out what ran through his mind- yet, Gelatin's shivering only grew more violent, and Puffball immediately cowered in her lovers arms, not wanting to hear the damned woman's name once more.

Feeling his heart beginning to ease, Firey cringed- realizing now how unnecessary that was. Of course Pin wasn't here.

She wasn't going to be.

Even if she was recovered.

Firey looked up. He watched as Tennis Ball would silently try to ease his racing mind, letting an exhale break past his lips before he spoke.

"Are you feeling alright?"

"..I'm.. not so sure." Firey murmured, rubbing his arm. "It's been a long while since.. Y'know.."

"Yeah. No need to go into detail- just let Basketball check up on your vitals."

Hearing how worn down the sports ball was, Firey looked away. He really didn't want to make this mistake again- after all, he was also shaken up by what had happened before.

How couldn't he? Heights were beyond a fear for him now- the mere thought alone made his mind crack.

But before he could walk away, a new realization dawned upon him,

one that caused him to stop right in his tracks. And before his mind could even process the possible sentence, he turned back to face Tennis Ball.

"And Leafy?"

"Leafy?" Tennis Ball raised an eyebrow. "I-..What about her?"

"Are you going to bring her back??"

Perplexed, Tennis Ball couldn't help but pucker his lips out of confusion. The contestant went on for years without mentioning her mere presence- and now, he was asking for her to return?

He wasn't the only one who was also lost by the matter. Snowball crossed his arms, unable to process how he could simply change from complete ignorance, to deep concern over their former acquaintance.

"Firey, we thought you hated her!" The others murmured in agreement as Snowball had spoke. "What do you mean by that??"

"Snowball- does it matter?"

"It does if you could drop her like that-"

"After everything, it shouldn't!"

"Firey-"

"I need her back."

L-E-A-F-Y.

Each second that passed felt agonizing to the flame. He had to cut the act- he had to make up for what he had done.

He never knew how short life was until he wasn't recovered from the fall.

The familiar green hue then caught his eye, as the lemon leaf carefully emerged from the machine- and unlike the others, she plopped onto the ground with a solemn hush, silencing the quiet chatter that swarmed the lab.

There she was.

His-

"Leafy...?"

It had been months- years- since he had said her name out loud. It rolled off his tongue with such ease, filling him with a sense of ease, and grief.

He couldn't leave it like this.

Hesitantly, he tried to approach her, before Tennis Ball quickly held him back- a yoyleberry in hand.

"Let's not recover her twice, now."

Oh. Right.

Ringing.

It was all that she could hear.

The woods called to her- it was the very last thing she saw.

But something deep in her soul called to her-

Leafy.

Was she still dead..? Forgotten by those she had known?

Not once did she ever picture this for herself.

She never meant to.

Please. Listen to me.

She was alone.

She had to get used to it.

It stung, it hurt, it made her bleed- but it would never leave her. And she had to understand this-

Please.

There was so much she wished she could have fixed. She never wanted to die; but-

Listen to me.

..Firey...

Her heart- was she ready to.. Love again..?

Please.

Would she ever get the chance to see him...?

I see you.

That voice...

"I-I see you now. I promise." Firey reassured her, carefully wrapping his arms around her now stiff body. "I see you."

The words were enough to break Leafy out of the trance, as her eyes would slowly begin to shift towards his arms. Feeling his warmth- his love- seeping into her frigid soul...

It was too much. Leafy's eyes watered, as she immediately threw her arms around Firey, hugging him tightly.

"Oh my tree- I-.. You don't even know how much I've missed you.." She croaked out, shakily wiping her eyes as she placed her hands on his cheeks. The way his light reflected off of her metal filled her heart with such ease, a reminder that they were both now here, alive, and out of harm's way.

And boy, did that comfort him too.

Carefully, Firey would cup his hands along the lemon leafs cheeks, letting himself be comforted by the green of her sparkling pupils. There was so much he wanted to say- to ask- to do, and to listen to- and this time, he was willing to make it right.

"So.. Yoyle City huh.. h-hah.." he began, gently caressing her cheek. Leafy could feel her heart melting at the gesture, but she shut her eyes, giving him a halfhearted chuckle.

"I guess so... there aren't many places for us to go, you know." She looked up. "But.. I don't mind."

"Where were you before.. or- well, after I.." he shivered.

"Hey.. no need to explain, I promise. I.. made things work down here. Even when.. it was all happening.."

"And- Did you see Pin..??"

Pin.

Leafy's heart sank. The smile that had grown from Firey's words immediately began to drop, as she then realized just how much he had missed.

How long he had been... gone for.

He..

"I..." Leafy could barely form a sentence, slowly glancing down at her quivering hands. Her fingers twitched and trembled with unease, the faded scars immediately serving as a reminder of-

Garden.

Hands.

Stretched aimlessly to the sky.

No, no- wait- she didn't get to-

Her hands- trembling, can't stop-

Screaming.

Pin.

Clawing. Fighting.

Wait-

Can't breathe- can't see- can't BREATHE-

Stab.

Stabbing.

Twisting.

No one is here to save you.

Get off-

Get-

Her eyes squeezed shut.

"I'm... really happy to be back.." Leafy clapped her hands gently, letting the dewiness of her eyes quickly vanish back into the depths of her mind. "And I'm- just as happy that you're back too, Fireball.."

Fireball. He hadn't heard that name in a while- he almost forgot how it swept him off of his feet.

Concern radiated from Firey's eyes, not realizing that he was holding his breath as he listened to his dear leaf. Watching how she tensed up, her eyes glistening over with a blanket of deeply-rooted terror that carried memories that were foreign to him. He couldn't just leave her like this- he wanted to know more.

He wanted to know what really happened back there.

But right now, he couldn't. Not yet.

Sighing, his hands carefully slid into Leafy's, their fingers intertwining with one another as he carefully lifted her to her feet. It took too much effort for her to try and pull herself against gravity- but she could feel the weight of the past dragging her to the center of the Earth. She wanted to fight- but she was so tired, after everything, all she wanted to do was have this taken off of her.

To have this dissipate into the tiniest grains of sand, raining down to

the soles of her feet.

Firey would carefully wrap an arm around her, gently bringing her to the side so they could get themselves settled into the world that awaited them. There were no wounds on them- at least, not anymore. But the mental wounds were still gaping, stinging from the cold air of truth that glazed against that raw flesh like the tip of a blade.

Despite this- here they were, together. In each other's arms, and not letting each other go.

Any object could see just how strong this care was, a tenderness that strengthened within the harmonizing beat of their hearts. It brought their eyes to the newly recovered, and while Pen watched everyone hug their loved ones after being apart for so long, he couldn't help but wonder, when was the last time he hugged a loved one?

When was the last time he hugged his sister?

Told her that he loved her?

The more he thought about it- the more he couldn't remember. And this brought a heartache that crashed straight into his chest, knocking the cool that kept him together, and filling his veins with the gut wrenching realization that-

"I want my sister back."

It only took the eyes of the faces he knew, for him to realize that he had said that out loud.

And what made it worse, was the fact that he felt the salty tears slipping from the corner of his eyes.

He never even considered what she had gone through while he was trapped in the Locker of Losers, and he couldn't help but feel a sense of selfishness for forgetting his sister that way.

But here he was- no longer an adult, no longer standing in a crowd of strangers, but a mere child, now trembling with unease as he wanted to see the face of his big sister once more.

Eraser would carefully take his hand into his, as Tennis Ball raised an eyebrow.

"So... I assume that Pencil's next?"

"Please.."

P-E-N-C-I-L.

"NOOOOO!! NO, NO!!"

"PENCIL- YOU'RE SAFE! IT'S OVER!"

"MY HEAD!!! SHE'S CUTTING MY HEAD!!"

"PEN, I AM NEVER TAKING YOUR INPUT EVER AGAIN." Tennis Ball shouted, trying to hold the flailing woman back before she did even more damage to the environment around her.

Or, at least- have the environment reflect the damage she carried in that mind of hers.

Pen shot the taller scientist a glare, as he frantically tried to get closer to her. His eldest sister was holding her hands over her head, kicking at anyone who tried to get near her, and this shook Pen to his very core.

What was once, a leader, and, may he add, the biggest jerk on Earth, was now reduced to a screaming mess, all while she held onto that head of hers. Pen was trying everything he could to calm her down, and he soon managed to clasp his hands on Pencil's shoulders. This proved to be terrible, as she immediately began to viciously slap at her brother's (noodle) arms.

But, with her hands now off of her head- she began to scream even

more. She immediately slammed her hands over the top of her head, her body trembling with unease at the thought of leaving it alone like that.

Pen could only watch in despair.

Why was she holding her head like that? WHY was she freaking out over letting it go?!

It had only been a few seconds since she was recovered- and with how hard she was screaming, he was sure that her vocal cords would soon rip.

No- no, no. He couldn't let it happen. Not now.

He had to get to her. There were still ten left to recover- he had to try and get her back.

He grabbed her arms, fighting the tears that stung at his eyes as he forced his sister to turn to face him.

"PENCIL!"

"P-PEN?!"

M-A-T-C-H.

"PENCIL, PLEASE!! MAKE IT STOOOP!!!"

"MATCH- LOOK AT ME!!"

"IT BURNS!! SHE'S BURNING ME!!!"

"NO! SHE'S GONE!! MATCH!"

"HELP ME!!! HELP ME, PLEASE HELP ME!!!"

Every recovery became more of a blur.

N-I-C-K-E-L.

"Oh- I'm fine, it's all fine! It was just a silly mishap- there's nothing to worry about!"

"Nickel- she killed you..."

"Cmon', TB! It doesn't mean I'm dead now! Haha, hah..."

"..Cut the act, Nickel. You aren't the only one who isn't okay right now."

Some quiet.

B-O-M-B-Y.

The faded scars on his wrists were nothing more but a sour reminder of what happened that day.

And Bomby- he couldn't stop brushing his hands over them.

"Hey- don't touch those scars on your wrist, they're just recovery burn..."

"Basketball- you're being too nice. Nickel- get him talking. You know him the best."

"I'm trying, GB! Bomby...?"

"..I just.. Wanted some bananas... why did she do that to us...?"

Some, still horrified.

S-P-O-N-G-Y.

"She ripped him in half."

"WHAT?! Nickel- you- are you SURE?!"

The silence alone was an answer; his silver eyes had seen the things that Pin had done.

But- no one could believe it.

"Jeez, GB... I think that's the biggest scar the recovery center has produced..."

"How long is it, TB."

"...The scar runs right down the middle of his body."

From the crowd, Donut could feel Barfbag's hand twitch ever so slightly. He didn't have to look down to see it-

He knew they were friends.

And he wouldn't keep her from that.

Letting her go, Barfbag would carefully approach the yellow sponge (don't say it.) and cupped her hands around his face, her mind drowning in disbelief as the scar told her the never ending nightmare that he would have to endure..

"Spongy.. what did she do to you..?"

One returned to the song of comforting silence.

W-O-O-D-Y.

All the fear he felt now condensed, to the violent, raging fear of that familiar red Pin.

His heart would forever race, now a little faster,

And his mind already fell into the claws of the damned.

He knew this would forever stay, as the scar on his cheek told a story he could never dare speak of.

Yet, here he was now, his feet firm on the ground, the gentle hum of the recovery center reminding him;

All was over.

No words were said.

But none were needed.

After all, his eyes met with Firey's. Rocky's head lifted to meet his gaze.

They are here now. The thought fluttered in his mind. They're here- and it's over.

Finally over.

Rocky quietly slipped from Golfball's hold,

Letting Firey step towards the balsa slice,

A hush falling over the rest.

Their faces told him everything.

The first three to go.

But Rocky's gentle embrace brought ease to his soul,

And the feeling of Firey's hand over his,

Was enough to bring tears to his eyes.

Safe.

They were now safe.

First three to go.

But now, the only three who could tell the tale.

Others returned in the moment.

N-E-E-D-L-E.

No.

She was- no, how could she be-

Was this-

No- she was back outside.

Back on the field.

Yoylebushes left and right, taunting her, screaming, laughing, reminding her that it was not over.

It was never over.

Pin.

Her throat closed.

She shook her head, tears stinging at the corner of her eyes.

Get back-

Let me go-

Pin-

Her hands squeezed tighter and tighter around her throat.

No-

LET GO-

"LET GO OF ME!! I CAN'T BREATHE, I CAN'T BREATHE PIN!!"

"STOP- FIGHTING, BACK!! TB, PUSH HER DOWN!"

"I'M TRYING- NEEDY!!"

"....W-WHAT... did you... call me...?!"

Another, returned after.

T-E-A-R-D-R-O-P.

Oh.

Needle couldn't believe it.

Seeing that face- the face that she had fallen in love with, many years ago.

She was so sure she would never see her again.

One step forward, three steps back.

Golfball had said to give them space. After the previous recoveries, it was currently unknown how every object would react, and she didn't want to risk anybody getting hurt once again.

...

But it had been so long...

The last time she saw her- it was before...

With trembling hands, Needle began to reach for the shorter object, shock painted over her pale face. She didn't want to try and go against GB's words here- but... maybe she could just...

Her face... wait...

Why were they...

In an instant, Teardrop fell onto their knees, throwing her arms around her stomach as violent retching filled the air. The contents that had once sat in their stomach now shot from her mouth, leaving a trail of fire that burned at the poor object's throat.

It had happened so suddenly, that the mixed reactions from the others were of little to no help. Some shrieked in disgust, while others immediately turned away, shielding their eyes from the disgusting scene. Eraser, who still held Pen in his arms, glared in disgust, the urge to yell at the girl biting at his mind- as this was SERIOUSLY uncalled for.

Those who were near her, immediately stepped back. The bitter stench brought tears to their eyes, and to Golfball, it nearly set her off, as she had now caused a mess on her own lab floors.

Yet, just how quick it had begun, it stopped. The remains of a familiar cupcake now on the ground, Teardrop coughed the remaining bits from her system, her limbs now losing their strength entirely. She could feel the last remaining fragments of strength leaving her body, a hollow, ghostly shell staying as a reminder as to the hell she had to endure.

Their eyelids began to grow heavy. She tried to fight against it, but the haziness would cloud her vision, with the world around her beginning to darken, more and more...

Fwoosh.

...

...Where was the floor...?

Confusion began to cloud Teardrop's mind, but the exhaustion was so strong- she barely had the strength to open her eyes and see what was happening. It was a battle, for sure- but Teardrop wasn't going to lose this one.

They fought against the sleepiness, silently grunting from the splitting migraine that stabbed at her skull. Even with this, her eyes

fluttered open.

Her arms. How could she forget them? It had been so long since they last saw Needle- is... was she still dead..?

Was this all some sort of prank??

Needle teared up. Cradling her dearest girlfriend, she hugged her tightly, her first and final words echoing in the back of her mind- back when it was Teardrop, who held her close instead.

But, unlike the past- they were both alive now.

They were here, together, their hearts beating as one. Finally reunited from death and metal boxes, refusing to let anything rip them apart once more.

Placing a kiss on Teardrop's forehead, Needle grimaced, letting their foreheads touch.

"I love you too, Teardrop...!"

F-L-O-W-E-R.

"FLOWER, NO!!!"

"Ruby, she's gone.."

"NO! NO!! DON'T TAKE HER AWAY FROM ME!"

"Time of death-"

"NOOOO!! FLOWER!!! FLOWER!!"

"RUBY!"

The scream burst through Flower's lips without a second thought. The metal taste of blood haunted her taste buds, her throat scorching from the vomit that ripped through her esophagus.

These senses still lingered- clinging onto her newly recovered self as she was now far from the past.

But her lover- her Ruby- her screams still echoed in the back of her mind. Even when her final breath slipped from her body, the gemstone's wails were the very last thing she heard before slipping into death's grasp.

Yet, she was no longer in that damned bed. The image of the clubhouse room was washed away by the fluorescent lights that shone down upon her, alienating her from the objects who stared at her.

It was like she was the sole star of the show; the stage was now paved for her, and the objects she had come to know were mere spectators in the seats below...

...That is, before Golfball's voice made her wince.

"Interesting... looks like they're beginning to start right where they left off." The scientist murmured, adjusting the glasses that Tennis Ball had retrieved for her, being mindful of the little rock that was hiding in her hold.

"S-Starting... where..?" Disoriented, Flower sat up, weakly brushing

her hands against her disheveled (and, rather dry) petals. Golfball huffed.

"Doesn't matter. Can you try and stand?"

Oh, she wished she could.

Pins and needles stabbed at her muscles, inching deeper beneath the layers of flesh as Flower would make a poor attempt to get herself off of the ground.

So much for being on a stage.

"Okay... can we try and help her here? We're not in Goiky's Funniest Videos."

Woah. Sorry- was that-

Pencil?

Flower's eyes glanced around the room. It had been so long since she had seen friends and enemies staring back at her; the blood in her veins nearly freezing in shock as she realized that she wasn't the only one who died back there.

But what made her heart drop, was when she spotted the *horrendous* scarf that was wrapped around Pencil's neck.

Seriously- were those polka-dots?! Polka-dots were SO not her.

...Wait. Come on- not now!

This wasn't the time!

Brushing herself off, Flower looked back towards the writing utensil. "I'm sorry- did you just-"

"I did. No need to repeat it." Pencil glared. "Let this be the first and last time I help you out here. We can't have everyone gawking at you as you get a taste of the ground."

Yeesh.

Flower swallowed any remaining words in her system, before her eyes trailed down to the woman that was being cradled in Pencil's arms.

Match.

Match...? She swore it was her, but-... she looked... terrible.

The matchstick's eyes were bloodshot, her pupils trembling like a leaf. She would repeatedly fan herself, ripping away from the striking warmth of Pencil's arms to let the winter air wash away the hellish burning from the past.

When she broke away, Pencil tried to pull her back- but her movements caused the scarf to shift, loosening from the poor girl's neck. Flower could catch a glimpse of what looked like a scar- but the fact that the scarf was falling made Pencil immediately tense up.

The color drained from her face, her exhaustion snapping back into fear as she immediately forgot about Match, grabbing both ends of the scarf and tightening them, hiding her scar once more. She swore- that seemed to be way too tight for it to be any comfort, at all.

But Flower looked away. It was clear that these two had been through hell and back after her death- and judging from their states now, she wasn't planning on asking them about it, anytime soon.

And that's when it hit her.

Book.

Ruby.

Oh.

Immediately, the bloom would whirl away from the crowd, coming face to face with the glowing screen of the recovery center.

B-O-O-K.

She had gone out to the roar of clashing, metal teeth, grinding her bones to mush.

Now, the hum of a pale machine filled her mind, almost as if it were giving her a warm welcome.

But this was short lived- as the aborted that were buried in the back of her mind, immediately returned to stab through her chest, much similarly to the shredder.

And boy- did it **hurt**; her papered heart being punctured over, and over, until she could feel no more. She may have laughed then- but would she now?

Hums. A reminder of the present, the now, this very moment which draped a blanket of ease over her aching soul. She wished this would help- but her wounds corrupted the pearly white sheet of the present, blood beginning to cloud the innocence that she would never have again.

Her blood.

The hums...?

Roars.

No. It's over. It should be over-

No-

Oh no, please, not again-

Please let it be-

"Book?"

The Yoyle air should've made her smile, but Book could only look up at the source of the voice- her bloodshot eyes twitching as a stream of blood trickled down her nose.

Tears. She was crying- were they tears?

Was it blood..?

No- she couldn't think. How her body ached with every movement she made.

"I... I think I broke something.": The sound of her own voice had grown foreign to her- she was gone for so long, it almost felt like an eternity.

Time, oh time, how cruel could you possibly be?

The sight disturbed those who had escaped the TLC. Every recovery unveiled a missing fragment from the puzzle that was the past, and they could only be thankful that the metal walls of the TLC kept them at bay from the chaos outside.

But to the victims- oh, it was such a quiet comfort to see, bringing back their fallen comrades and seeing them alive once more.

After being handed a rag from Basketball, Flower knelt down to Book's level, carefully wiping the tears of blood that would stain her cover. Her movements were so gentle- so tender- that it took the others by surprise, knowing the history that these two had.

Both as individuals, and together.

Knowing this- Book could feel an orb of sadness swelling in her throat, making it harder for her to try and take in a deep breath.

Here she was, being cared for by the girlfriend of the gem she had loved. And she didn't need to look to know that Ruby wasn't in the room with them.

Not yet.

"I-...I'm sorry I couldn't protect her." Book croaked out, her body shivering from the plethora of emotions that swarmed around her. Like a sea of box jellyfish, the guilt, sadness and anger stung through her skin, painting her body with the scars from their nematocysts.

The stinging immediately shaped into regret, as the woman held her mouth in shock.

Why? Why did she say that?!

What was she thinking?!

She wouldn't forgive her- she wouldn't-

"You did enough."

Book's thoughts were immediately cut short by the bloom's words. Stunned, she looked up, letting her eyes lock onto hers.

"..What..?"

"You did enough, Book. Enough for me- enough for Ruby." Flower took in a deep breath, clenching the rag tightly in her hands as she-

Wait.. was she crying..?

"Flower.." Book carefully reached towards the taller woman. This immediately made Flower jump, blinking rapidly to fight the tears that threatened to spill down her freckled face.

"Book- you never needed to apologize." Flower's voice trembled. "You did- everything you could to keep her safe."

"But-"

"-But nothing. It doesn't matter anymore- we're alive again, and now..."

The two held each other's hands, giving one another a firm nod.

"...We can bring her back..."

They both began to type.

"And it'll all be okay again- only this time... it'll be three of us..."

Flower pressed R. Book pressed U. And the two continued, until their hands were over one another on the green button- pressing it down, together.

R-U-B-Y.

It happened too fast.

First- her screams. Her begs for mercy.

She wailed about her aching eye- the eye that she had taken out.

Her cries wouldn't stop- they couldn't- and this disturbed the bloom and the book to their very cores.

But it seems that the gemstone had broken out of her flashback- seeing the two ladies she had fallen madly in love with, now standing before her, after losing the both of them in ways that would haunt her for the rest of her life.

....

Her breaths quickened. It's been too long- way too long- she needed them, she had to make sure that they were real-

But in that moment, she lifted herself up, sprinting straight into the arms of her girlfriend.

Flower.

The wails continued. Ruby could only bury her face into the blooms chest- disbelief striking her as she was now healthy, and alive.

How it hurt- to finally see that familiar gemstone with them in this plane of existence..

Only for her to see *the other woman* instead.

Book's paged heart broke.

For it was very clear, that she was no longer in that gemstones vision, any longer.

Recoveries.

A process that they had once grown used to.

Dying repeatedly in the games led them to being unfazed by the process- hell, they weren't even phased by the idea of death.

But after everything that had taken place- the garden, the hands, and their murders- they could never see their original visions, for the rest of their lives.

With the return of the majority of the IDFB cast, Basketball looked towards the two scientists, relying on their commands in order to proceed.

But- she could see a tense aura hanging over the two, as she sensed that there was still someone they had yet to recover.

"Golfball- we have to- we can't just leave him like that."

"No."

"He didn't do anything! Coiny was her-"

"WE ARE NOT BRINGING COINY BACK." The sudden yell from Golfball made a sharp chill run down Tennis Ball's spine, as he immediately turned back to face the woman.

"Wh-Why not?!"

"What do you mean "why not"?! That idiot- HE WAS THE REASON WE ALL DIED!"

"He couldn't have known!"

"HE ABSOLUTELY COULD HAVE. HE NEVER KNOWS WHAT'S GOING ON- HE'S NOTHING BUT AN IDIOT!"

"GB- keep it down!" Tennis Ball noticed Rocky's flinching, his trembling growing more severe as the yelling triggered a migraine.

Almost immediately, Golfball would stop- her eyes widening in fear as she frantically checked the small figure. His whines tugged at her petrified heart, as she grimaced, immediately looking back towards the crowd.

"He could've known. And if he didn't- his blind eye resulted in our deaths."

"..But.. she killed him." Firey looked up, holding onto Gelatin and Puffball as his body continued to shiver every now and then. "How could he have known- if she killed him herself?"

"I-.. well-.. still-" Stuttering, GB tried to divert the question- but the lemon leaf wouldn't let this slide.

"He never thought that she'd be behind it all. You knew him- we all did. She was his world.

"And like the rest of us- he fell into her dirty little hands. He needs us- and that's something I will not let down."

Hesitation came from the crowd. How couldn't it- they knew she had a point. The coin was head over heels for his dearly beloved

thumbtack- love blinded him from seeing the horrific nature that fell into place because of her.

But if he returned without a care...?

He couldn't- Fries heard it- he heard their fight, even as he slipped from conciousness.

...but was it really worth the risk..?

C-O-I-N-Y.

Sometimes, when the competition becomes overwhelming, good dreams bless the exhausted mind of that familiar copper coin. Being handed the certificate of Dream Island. Winning the first prize ever in BFDIA. Recently, fate sent him his friends and acquaintances, all gathered together in a field of light, their endless chattering filling the angelic air.

He saw no signs of death- there was no blood, no wounds, just the smiles and laughter of those he had been around for years on end. Their conversations were endless, going on and on and filling him with a sense of ease.

Though, it had all fallen quiet. There were strange in-betweens where the quiet voices would brush by his ears, and vanish, returning to the silence that now surrounded him.

It took him a minute, but when his eyes opened, he was greeted with the faces he once saw in his dreams- as well as faces he hadn't seen in forever.

And when that familiar flame came to view, Coiny could feel the sobs scratching at his throat. He sprang up, immediately rushing to Firey as he threw his arms around him, squeezing him ever so gently.

This caught Firey by surprise- I mean, this was his arch nemesis- it was COINY. You'd think they'd immediately go at each others throats, but the quiet sobs that came from his shivering body was enough to make Firey hold him tight.

"Y-You're alive.." Coiny cried, holding him tighter. "I-... oh my mint, I am so sorry..."

"Sorry for what..? Coiny.." Frowning, Firey would rub his back, trying to soothe the guy. The question fell on deafened ears, and all he could do was comfort him to the best of his abilities.

Coiny's mind raced. He was alive. He was alive, he was here, and he was holding him. No more of that stupid rivalry, no more tension and no more slapping- no. He couldn't lose him again.

And this brought a wave of ease to the coin. Even as he held Firey's face, getting a good look at him to make sure that this was real, there was something about this that eased his racing mind. It was strangely a comforting sight, but as he tried to hold on, that feeling would eventually slip away from his grasp, leaving the space for reality to set in.

And it did.

Once he let go of Firey, he stepped back, now getting a good realization of the damage she had done. His body was painfully heavy, almost as if there were cement that had now hardened and settled in his veins. It kept him grounded- leaving him on the floor as his eyes glanced over the others, both who had died before him, and, from what he could guess, those who died after.

He clenched his fists. It was hard to tell what was going through that mind of his- his arms now beginning to tremble as his eyes became dewey with tears. There was nothing that anyone could try and say to him- except for one.

He had always seen Coiny as a son. Well- son-in-law. He was... her... partner- and she was someone he had grown to care for, even if he couldn't show it properly. And after hearing the points that were made previously, he was so sure that his anger would snap, the moment he saw that coin's face. But he couldn't.

There was no use for it. After everything they had been through, this was not worth the energy. Everyone was exhausted, and dreary, with long battles awaiting them on their paths to the future. Fries didn't want to make this any harder.

He looked towards Coiny, and as if their minds synched together, his eyes locked onto his. The two had gone together- one after the other, after making a discovery that changed their lives for the worst. That connection never faltered- even as they stood here, in the present. There was a silence that stretched between the two, but the gaze from Fries began to break him, his lip shivering as he tried to find the right words to say.

It had been so long.

He had lost count.

What could he say...?

"I'm sorry I couldn't protect you." The sorrow that radiated from Coiny's own voice made him wince.

Regret.

He had no need to feel regret.

And that was enough to prove it, right there.

"None of us knew," Fries uttered, carefully holding his family close. "It isn't your fault, Coiny."

"But- she... I was-... I never thought she would..."

"We didn't know. We didn't."

Suddenly, Pen's voice interjected the two, his face beginning to radiate with the frustration that raced through his heart.

"YOU DIDN'T KNOW?!" He scowled, "HOW COULDN'T YOU HAVE KNOWN?!"

Coiny shot up, shivering at the rage from his friend. "I-I- I was-"

"COINY- SHE KILLED EVERYONE. EVERYONE!! AND YOU WEREN'T SUSPICIOUS OF HER AT ALL?!"

"Pen, I COULDN'T BE! I-I LOVED HER-"

"SHE KILLED MY SISTER!"

His heart dropped. Coiny watched as Eraser would carefully pull Pen back, his face scrunched with anger as he could barely look at his elder sister. He wasn't the only one who had lost someone that close to him- and that realization made his heart shatter, the pieces scattering endlessly through his body.

But before he could fully collapse, he could see Fries reaching for him. With the remaining amount of strength he had, he ran into Fries' arms, his sobs breaking through the barrier he had desperately tried to keep. Every cry and wail reverberated through the lab, carrying

the regret and heartbreak that he had to carry for the rest of his life.

She did what she did. There was no changing that.

But the sun was still here- Pin, was not. The world may not have ended, but to Coiny, it felt like it did.

"Are. You. Serious."

The words escaped Fanny's mind, even as she tried her best to contain the anger that was quickly beginning to spike. She felt how heavy the atmosphere was- the misery practically radiated from those who were brought back.

But after EVERYTHING. They-

"How could you all FORGET about her?!"

"Forget about who, Fanny." Basketball pouted, immediately shooting an angered glare towards her.

"I wasn't talking to you, but maybe I'll let you pass. Your IQ is about the same as the cold right now, after all!"

"Excuse me?!"

"Hey- enough! Fanny, what are you talking about?!" Tennis Ball interjected, carefully pulling her away from the electrical fan.

Oh, how dense could they POSSIBLY be right now- the light was practically bending around these idiots!

After everything, Fanny was furious as to how little they cared about the one that had put an END to that monster- INCLUDING her own

teammates!

She whirled towards the Freesmarters- not caring that they were all still in shock- as she immediately addressed them.

"Don't you think you're forgetting SOMEONE." Fanny gritted through her teeth.

Someone.

Oh.

Book flinched, her arms hugging herself tighter than before. She knew exactly who she was talking about- besides, how could she forget?

The way they gave her in?

Tossed her aside, like a rotten banana peel?

Her expression was enough to give her away, as Fanny's eyebrows furrowed together, frustration now boiling from her head.

"BUBBLE AND ICE CUBE! YOU IDIOTS!"

"We were getting to them." Pencil murmured weakly, her voice rather hoarse as the scarf was tightening every last breath out of her. "We just had to wait."

"Wait?! They deserved to be THE FIRST who got recovered- they SAVED YOU!"

"Saved us?!" A broken smile etched on Book's cover, clenching her fists. "They got me KILLED!"

"AND THEY STILL KILLED HER IN RETURN." Fanny snapped back.

The chaos that ensued only caused the others to shrink into nothingness. Hearing the words that left Book's mouth, Ruby looked up, her heart dropping as she realized that she didn't make it far, either.

Book.

The gemstone shakily reached for her, but Book didn't see this- her frustration and grief blinding her from any rational thought that formed in her mind.

"THEY GAVE ME UP." She yelled. "AND YOU THINK THEY'RE HEROES?!"

"BOOK- I'M SORRY, BUT THEY PUT AN END TO IT ALL."

"AT THE COST OF MY LIFE! I COULD'VE REVIVED EVERYONE- I WAS THE ONE WHO NEARLY FINISHED THE RECOVERY CENTER!"

"STOP IT!" Bracelety screamed, immediately jumping in between the two. "JUST STOP!!"

A hush blanketed over the objects. There was nothing they could say- but the realization that they had left the two for last immediately sank underneath their skin, and the guilt that ensued was enough for them to break beyond repair.

But, they held themselves together.

"...Let's bring them home." Golfball adjusted her glasses tiredly, giving her nod of approval as Tennis Ball made his way to the recovery center.

"Any particular order you want, here?"

"No. We just need to recover Bubble- and Ice Cube. And don't you dare forget them ever again." Fanny growled, turning her head to watch as the sports ball began to type her name.

"We already let them down once." Bracelety whispered, the name of her lover reflecting from her shimmering eyes.

Just by not being there.

Not saying enough.

Not helping enough.

I-C-E-C-U-B-E.

But now, they would make things right.

"We won't let them die in vain again."

Pained Reunion

Existing was easy when you lived in the dark.

Seriously- Bracelety knew. She spent so much time in that massive, metal box, that she had begun to lose that drive of hers- the one that guided her daily routines. Clueless about the events that unfolded outside, life began to feel boring- an emptiness that made the rubber bracelet bored of, what should have been, something jubilant.

There was nothing. And with nothing, she did not live- she was merely existing.

At least, until she heard that voice.

Such a soft, and gentle voice- Bracelety couldn't help but try and investigate who had been on the opposite side of the wall that day. And boy, she did not regret it one bit.

Getting to know Ice Cube sparked that passion back into Bracelety, her heart beating with the admiration she had for her. There was so much to Ice Cube, so much that led the currents of love directly into Bracelety's heart. And despite the situation that she found herself in, she promised Icy that she would be there for her, no matter what.

The walls of the TLC may have separated their physical forms, but their souls had united as one, intertwining with the melody that came from their enamored heartbeats.

But they day she stopped hearing Icy, was the day that the melody had been lost.

What followed was the endless attempts at breaking free from the prison that held them. And when Icy's friend- Bubble, was it?- also stopped speaking, the confusion that hung over them morphed into a crushing panic, and unruly anger.

With her drive now restored, and her passion blazing through her soul, Bracelety spent months to break free; to find that missing melody of her lover, and keep her safe.

And they did. They broke free- escaping into the city which had been abandoned once more. The sunlight replenished their aching bodies, and that familiar autumn breeze was the gentle reminder of their newfound freedom.

At least, for everyone except Fanny and Bracelety. The two immediately tried to search for their missing lovers, with the others quickly joining in their efforts. Hours turned to days as they realized that they had a large region to search and cover through.

Yet, it all came to an end when that garden was found.

It was Bracelety who stumbled onto the path, with the dirt road calling to her as it snaked through the trees. A part of her didn't want to go, but that call.... It was too powerful for her to try and ignore. She had to see what was at the end of this road.

To this day, the others still couldn't recall her reaction. Especially when the hands had come into her line of sight.

With that, their search had ended. The two found the woman that they had searched oh so desperately for, but... not in the way that they had hoped.

Bracelety knew that her fateful conversation with Icy would result in a coup de foudre, one that would bloom as they would finally reunite in the garden, that was, their relationship.

She never imagined she'd see her lover dead, holding her lifeless face when she had always dreamed of cradling her, and feeling the gentle beats of her heart.

She saw her cadaver before she could even see her eyes for the first time.

It destroyed her; a piece of her soul nearly died that day.

But as she saw Ice Cube's name blinking on the screen, she could barely contain the concern, anxiety and joy that buzzed in her mind. She could feel the heavy palpitations of her heart as Tennis Ball activated the recovery machine.

She was ready. Ready to fulfill the promises she had made, ready to finally give Ice Cube the love she had deserved after all this time.

Tottering on her feet, Bracelety's hands trembled, causing her to flap and wave them excitedly- but a nudge quickly made her stop, turning to the figure beside her.

"Bracelety," Fanny's stern tone made the girl frown. "I get you're excited- but remember. This is not the time."

"But she's back- s-she should be okay once she realizes it!" Bracelety whispered, fidgeting with her fingers. "We're all here- I'm here!"

"Bracelety."

"I can calm her down, Fanny! Trust me!"

"You SAW how she was left. Do you think she'll recover with a smile on her face?!"

As harsh as Fanny could be, Bracelety frowned, as the gravity of the situation was slowly beginning to settle in. She couldn't help but feel ecstatic- having the chance to see her lover alive was all she could have ever dreamed of. But when she remembered how her team had reacted when they first recovered...

She grimaced (this is a normal word guys! shocking, I know.). This wasn't the time.

A part of her wished that she could shower Icy with all the love she had to give, but the poor woman had to live through something so utterly horrifying, that the bracelet knew that she wouldn't ever be able to understand.

A ding. A thump. Silence... then gasps.

Rumors had been spread about the state of Ice Cube's body when she

was found. Some had thought that she was beaten and shattered- others heard that she had been skinned alive.

None of them had expected to see the cracks and scars that painted her pale body, with some running deeper into her flesh than others. Her sides were jagged, some pieces of her missing and unaccounted for.

There was not a single area that was left untouched. And the faint scars on her legs solidified that.

Shivers went down Bracelety's spine. For a mere second, Bracelety swore that she could see an indent that, what might as well have been, in the shape of Pin.

She could only hope that the revived didn't see it.

A listless aura radiated from Ice Cube's eyes. Like the others, dark circles hung underneath them, carrying the untold story of the hell that she had lived through.

Bracelety gulped. She looked to the side, relieved to meet Fanny's reassuring gaze. The electrical fan gave her a simple nod, her plug tail giving her a pat on her back. She knew that Bracelety understood the situation now- and with that, her girl needed her, more than ever before.

Quiet footsteps echoed through the air, as Bracelety approached Ice Cube, containing the hurricane of emotions that blazed through her mind. Those who had been recovered watched silently, an endless curiosity filling them as they couldn't help but question what she had gone through after their deaths.

They weren't sure what was worse- dying in the way that they did, or being the final one standing, watching every object die around you, as your death was moments away.

Book clutched a fresh hand towel close to her chest, as she watched the scene unfold before her. There was a part of her- this tiniest, foolish part of her- that wanted to go to her, and comfort her to the best of her abilities.

The two were friends, after all. They had been through thick and thin together, from enduring frigid nights on the roof of the clubhouse, to surviving Pin's wrath as they tried to run some errands for Pencil. And this strengthened the bond that the two had carried.

A friendship that would last forever, as some may say. But in Book's case, it was a friendship that ended with her being given away, leading to her haunting demise.

And Icy? She got to live. She got more time- something that Book could have used to finish the recovery center.

Was this anger? Betrayal? A sadness that couldn't be fixed? Book's chest ached. She couldn't deal with another heartbreak today, not again.

But as she looked up, she immediately met those familiar, frosty eyes of hers.

Ice Cube didn't move. In fact, she sat so perfectly still, almost as if she were a statue.

Repressing the urge to reach for her, Book frowned, watching as Icy's lips began to quiver.

There was so much she wanted to tell Book; her best friend, someone who gave her the stars of hope that illuminated their darkened paths. She wanted to apologize, to hug her, to tell her how much she meant to her, but the sentence escaped before she could even realize:

"It hurts."

That was it. A heavy tremor overtook Book, before a hushed sob broke past her mouth. Her hand flew over it to try and keep herself quiet, but the bloodied tears had come out of the dark, trickling over the faded scars that reminded Icy of what she had done.

"It hurts.." Icy whispered once more, tears blurring her vision as she watched Book cry. She noticed Ruby shakily reaching towards her, using her remaining bits of strength to try and comfort her dearest book- but Book harshly pulled away, her eyes narrowing.

"Yeah," Book sniffled, "Getting shredded hurt too."

The hearts of those who had watched, dropped in unison, once they heard Book's words. Pencil held her mouth in shock, as Ruby turned away, beginning to cry into Flower's arms. Fiery clutched Leafy protectively, flinching at the heaviness of the situation.

Pin- the damage you have caused, the sins you have brought upon yourself- what did we do to deserve this?

For a moment, Ice Cube tried to shift, wanting to go towards Book and-

"Ice Cube?"

Wait... That voice....

"Bracelety?" Ice Cube's voice was now reduced to a mere whisper, as she turned to face the blue bracelet.

Their first gaze, now tainted by the pain that could never be washed away. There she was- the girl she had fallen for, the one who swept her off her feet, and reintroduced the feeling of being loved.

No scars or bruises were on Bracelety's beautiful face. Her posture emitted such a comforting warmth, a protective barrier that Icy could retreat to at any time, avoiding the blazing inferno, that was reality.

She was here. But...

Pin had lied. She lied to her. She was told that she would destroy the TLC, and use Bomby to burn them alive.

She gave Book up - for nothing.

Nothing at all.

And the reality that awaited her was one where this decision would haunt her every passing thought, for the rest of her days.

The guilt opened like a stinging wound that refused to heal. Her throat closed tight, and the tears that stung at her eyes would

immediately cause Bracelety to rush to her side, carefully wrapping her arms around the shorter woman.

Their first hug,

But instead of laughter and loving exchanges, there was the agonizing sobs that carried the bitter taste of the past.

B-U-B-B-L-E.

UGH! Fanny HATED falling in love!

Especially when the timing CLEARLY isn't right!

She watched as Bubble emerged from the recovery machine, and the moment she caught a glimpse of those sky-blue eyes of hers, her heart skipped a beat. Such a gentle blue- getting lost within Bubble's haze was a thought that made the blush burn on Fanny's cheeks.

Ack- blushing?! She HATED blushing!

Once she emerged, there was silence, as all eyes fell on the final victim of the massacre. Pencil's face turned pale at the sight of her. Leafy winced, having to look away.

Every object that had been recovered had some sort of scarring that served as a reminder for their brutal end. But Bubble's body was clean, untouched by the damned weapons that had been used by Pin. It looked completely normal, a familiar sight that the others weren't expecting to see.

But the lack of marks were made up for, as Fanny's eyes slowly fell

onto her arms. Scars etched around the entirety of Bubble's arms- the most gnarly being on the arm that had been severed and broken, in which the thick scar snaked around her elbow.

There was no part of her arm that was left unscathed- and this horrified the others. Bubble stood in front of the watching crowd, but no sounds or movement came from her or the lab; at least, until a snicker broke that silence.

"You've got to be joking- SHE managed to kill Pin?!" Blocky stifled a laugh, crossing his arms. "I don't believe it!"

"She was the last one we spoke to, idiot." Fanny snapped back.

"And what? Did she use the power of friendship and ask Pin to stop?"

"Blocky, it doesn't matter!"

"Cmon'! The crybaby should've been the first to go! I'm telling you- she's just trying to label herself as a hero from this mess, when she's actually FAR from it!"

"SHUT UP!"

The sound of Blocky's laughter filled Fanny with rage. *Not the time*, she would think to herself, *right now is not the time*.

As she approached her, she would carefully move around Tree, who had been watching the recoveries with a heavy heart. Every victim that returned filled his soul with trepidation, as he knew that the stories of their deaths would be nothing short of terrifying.

This all took place while they were in the safety of the TLC- and if that thumbtack had gotten to them, would they have made it through to tell the tale? Or would they be the ones, staggering away from the recovery machine?

He shivered, clutching Bottle's hand close to himself. Seeing her turn and give him that trademark smile- a smile that made his heart melt every time- only reminded him of how thankful he was that they were all safe. Bottle couldn't help but wrap her arms around him, as

the two would watch as Fanny attempted to approach her lover.

"Hey, Bubble...?" Fanny spoke softly, using her tail to carefully caress her pale cheek. "Look- it's me..."

Silence.

Fanny's lips tightened with worry as she noticed how stiff Bubble was, not even giving her a simple glance. The others would catch onto this, and they wouldn't hesitate to try and help their dearest friend, in order to bring her back to reality,

"Bubble- we're all here now..." Leafy called, staying in the comforting embrace of Firey's arms. "It's all over..."

"Cmon' Bubb. Snap out of it." Pencil encouraged, fighting the tears that threatened to spill.

"We're in the lab- the recovery center is working again." Tennis Ball assured her.

But even with all of this, there was nothing that came from the poor soap bubble. And despite the tired expression that was on her face, it began to annoy Blocky to no end.

"Okay- this is getting annoying." He murmured under his breath. He began to move, but he felt someone grab at his arm, stopping him in his tracks.

He didn't expect Pen to be the one trying to stop him. This was the guy who usually rooted for his pranks- a friend who supported his funny doings, day and night.

But today, Pen was tired.

Pen was tired out from having to calm his sister down. Being the younger of the two, it was usually the opposite- he remembered the times where Pencil would begrudgingly check his closet and beneath the bed for the monster that plagued his childhood. He remembered the time she let him drag his sleeping bag to her room, after being awoken by a terrible thunderstorm.

Sure, she refused to let him lay a finger on her bed sheets- but having her near was comforting enough to lull him to sleep.

Now, she was the one who wailed in terror. She was the one who refused to let her head go, convinced that it would roll right off if her grip became loose enough. There were nightmares plaguing her view, and he didn't know how to stop them.

Eraser was there for him, of course. Giving him advice on how to go about caring for her, he would offer his boyfriend a helping hand when it came to his family. But Pen couldn't help but feel guilty.

Hesitantly, he tried to stop Blocky from saying anything else, but the other had no plans of keeping his mouth shut.

"Blocky..!!" Pen frowned, trying to reach for the red block. Blocky slid right past his grasp, tutting as he would make his way to Bubble, standing right in front of her.

"Hey- crybaby. Why don't you snap out of it and get to talking!" He snapped, a scowl on his face.

No response.

"Dude- let's just leave her be." Pouting, Eraser would carefully approach him. "She isn't going to-"

"No! I'm not moving until she tells us the truth- of what REALLY happened to Pin! Cmon', you stupid crybaby- say something!"

"Blocky!"

"Helloooo??? Did you recover without a brain?? Answer me you stupid bitch!"

Nothing. Even as he shouted and snapped his fingers at her face, the woman did not respond to his harsh words.

And this infuriated him.

"Alright! You asked for it- I tried being nice, but we're just going to have to do the old "kill and recover" treatment! Don't say I didn't

warn you, BUBBLE."

Don't say I didn't warn you.

Bubble's pupils shrank.

Don't say I didn't warn you.

They slowly locked onto the red figure below her.

Don't say I didn't warn you.

No.

Don't say I didn't warn you...Bubble.

Her heart dropped.

No.

Not again.

NOT AGAIN!

Fear struck at her heart, and Bubble immediately swung a hard punch at the wooden block's face. There was a loud crack that reverberated around the room- mixed with the panic screams that soon drowned in the whirlpool of Bubble's panicked thoughts.

It was Pin.

Pin was back.

She was back-

"YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO DIE, PIN!" Bubble screamed, forcefully shoving the red figure to the ground. All she could see was that red thumbtack trying to regain herself, but Bubble wouldn't let her- forcefully hitting her down. She then began to throw punch after punch, her swings becoming harsher and heavier.

"NO, PIN! NO!"

Her strength grew.

"I WON!!"

Blood splattered on her fists.

"I WON AND YOURE GONE!! LEAVE US ALONE- JUST LEAVE US ALONE!"

She didn't know where she was.

She didn't understand why she was back.

But that was Pin.

Pin was back too.

And she refused to let her KILL HER AGAIN-

"BUBBLE, STOP!!"

She would suddenly be yanked away by her wrist, a tail wrapped around it tightly as the world around her slowly fell into place. Her final glimpse of the garden began to vanish, and the view of the lab immediately replaced it, with objects coming into her line of sight. She could see Needle- who was backing away from her in shock as she held Teardrop in her arms. Fries stood in front of Gelatin and Coiny protectively, having Puffball settle with the singular fry in his carton. Freesmart- oh, man- they had all tried to break up the fight (excluding Match, who was frantically fanning herself in the spot that Pencil had left her in).

How- when did they come back..? Wasn't the recovery center ruined?

Bubble looked down, and in an instant, her stomach turned. The red figure- which she had mistaken as Pin- was lying on the ground, writhing in pain as his friends were worriedly catering to.

Blocky.

Black and blue bruises struck from his usual red coloring. His eye was now swollen shut, and the floor around him was now stained with the blood that came from the skin that had been busted open.

Everybody had always thought of Bubble as fragile. All they could see was someone who was weak, someone who was timid and could barely lift a stick. But now, that vision had long died- as they realized just how strong this object was.

She defeated Pin, after all. She may be a gentle soul- but everything that had transpired in the past few months had destroyed that sense of peace in her mind.

As she began to adjust to the scene around her, the sound of a door swinging open caught the attention of the others. Grassy quickly scampered into the crowd, excitedly holding a glowing rock in his hands as he made his way to Basketball. Robot Flower quickly chased after him, trying to contain the child, but her efforts proved to be futile, as she gave herself a facepalm.

"Basketball!! Look!!" he exclaimed, waving the mystical rock in her face. "Look at what Grassy found!"

"Grassy!" Basketball gasped, immediately trying to step in front of the shorter object. Desperately, she tried to shield his line of sight from the chaos that had ensued before her, but her efforts were in vain, as Grassy would shift from her view, his eyes locking onto-

"Blocky...?"

The joy that could usually be heard from his voice had vanquished- leaving behind a mere whisper. Grassy's blades began to curl up in fear, as he watched Snowball carefully lift Blocky upright, using his hand to try and close the bleeding wounds.

Blood?

Oh no, Basketball winced. She knelt down, carefully pulling him close.

"Hey," She spoke quietly, caressing his blades, "He's okay! I-I promise- it was just another-"

"Blocky!!" Immediately, Grassy would sprint from her hold, dropping the rock from his hands as he immediately threw his tiny arms around the block. His blades trembled with worry, and even if his arms weren't able to go all the way around, he still squeezed him tight, terrified.

Despite the aching wounds on his body, Blocky slowly looked down to find the little grass guy in his hold. Every movement brought a new wave of agony to crash into his every muscle, but he grunted, slowly wrapping his arms around him, cradling him close. Snowball would try to protest against it, but Blocky shook his head, holding him closer.

"Hey," Blocky uttered, giving him a weakened smile, "I-..I'm okay..."

"Blocky's hurt! Blocky is not okay!" Sniveling, Grassy buried his face into his chest. "Grassy's scared!"

"Grassy.." He lifted the bundle of grass, taking a deep breath to power through the pain. "Even if I'm not okay- there's still nothing to be scared about... don't you remember who I am..?"

"..Blocky..?"

"That's right- the strongest contestant, someone who won't let anyone get in his way."

"But what if you get hurt again..?"

"Then I get back up. Life is that way, kiddo- and sometimes... you just have to shove life right back to the ground. Our funny doings won't be threatened by anything- o-or anyone... no matter what."

"No matter what..?"

The worry in his voice; it nearly made Blocky's heart break. He shut

his eyes, gently clutching the younger object close with ease.

"No matter what."

Watching from the distance, Basketball sighed in relief, letting Grassy stay with Blocky. She had to admit- she didn't want the guy to get any more stressed than he already was. Getting beaten up in broad daylight was nothing short of embarrassing- but he knew that Grassy's presence would help keep his head up.

As the two continued to comfort one another, she would turn towards the opposite side, letting Bubble come into her line of sight. The others had to back away, out of fear that she would hurt them in the process- but Fanny was still right by her side, quiet words being exchanged between the two women.

"Bubble- Bubble, can you hear me..?"

"W-We.. aren't outsoide..?"

"No.. look- we're in the lab... we're inside.."

"I-..I thought she was-"

"She's gone, Bubb.. She's gone- and we're going to keep it that way..."

Fanny was not one to make promises. After all, she hated them! She knew that they would be broken, or forgotten about, and she was not in the mood to experience it.

But seeing her lover, trembling with the unease and fear that carried into her revival made Fanny's heart ache.

"Oh, Bubble.." Fanny's voice shook, as she carefully caressed Bubble's

cheek with her plug tail. "We.. we got you.. I got you.."

It was always Bubble's voice that settled the anger and tense aura that came from Fanny. But now- Fanny's voice was enough to bring a ray of light back into Bubble's view. The tensity in her bones slowly fell loose- and her head would gently melt into the feeling of her tail, tears finally making their way up to her eyes.

"..Foinny.." She whispered, carefully wrapping her arms around her. Fanny shut her eyes- sinking into the softness of her lover.

The love that these two had for one another- Basketball could practically see the hearts in Fanny's eyes. She heard their conversations when they were trapped in the TLC, and despite the harsh exterior she likes to front, there is a deep core of care within her heart, one that only the closest of objects could come to discover.

And Bubble seemed to be the first.

As Bubble's gaze fell down onto Fanny, Basketball watched as her soft smile began to vanish. The gentle happiness that she was carrying slowly began to vanish, and Fanny didn't seem to notice- as she was too busy waving off Snowball.

Seems like stress of everything was getting to her- and she wanted to help, as much as she could.

But the sound of Golfball's voice made her freeze.

"What was that little TWERP doing in my ARCHIVE?!" The smaller scientist snapped, angrily making her way towards her. "WHY is he here?!"

Basketball rolled her eyes. "We're taking care of him."

""We're"?!"

"Basketball and I." Robot Flower's mechanical tone interjected through their conversations, crossing her arms as she stood beside Basketball. "Figured we wanted to try and make sure the kid didn't see anything we had to see."

"Good for you- but again. Why did you feel the need to have him in my lab?!"

"Do you not understand what "watching over" means."

"He was looking through my archives!! That room is OFF LIMITS- to EVERYONE who ISN'T ME OR TB!"

"Well, you weren't around."

Every comment Robot Flower made fueled the anger in Golfball's mind. How dare did they make such a foolish mistake- what if he had broken something of VALUE?! Something irreplaceable! GB could feel the migraine coming on.

"I want that kid out." She murmured, glancing back up towards the two. "I don't trust having his grubby little hands all over my stuff. Look- he took the yoylite out of its display!"

"It's not the end of the world, Golfball. You got it back." Basketball sighed.

"And it's in one piece." Robot Flower chimed in.

Well- they weren't wrong. Even as Golfball inspected the yoylite chunk in her hold, she began to wonder if she was taking things too far. But holding the stone was enough to soothe her mind, and she looked up, giving them a slight nod.

"...Well. I'd like to ask if you both could respect my wishes."

The fact that she was asking with such ease made Basketball smile. She wouldn't say no to that now- returning with a gentle nod. Golfball sighed, simply returning to Tennis Ball, immediately slumping into his hold as her exhaustion immediately ate away at her mind.

And from there, everyone had returned. Those from the TLC couldn't help but try to converse with the newly recovered- to try and make sure that they were ok, and to see if there was anything they could do to help.

But their responses were all the same. We're okay. We need to be alone. We just need time. Over and over again, it was clear that the fear was still there, especially in the way that they held one another just a little tighter.

Yet, with this, there was Bubble. Despite the mishap earlier, the name, "hero", began to break from the lips of those around her.

"You're a hero..." Leafy said quietly. "You stopped her from doing more..."

Bubble shook her head slowly. "I didn't, mean to..."

"We know. But- you stopped her. And that's what matters."

Hero.

She never wanted that name.

Hero.

She lost everything in the blink of an eye.

Hero.

Hero.

Hero.

As Basketball carefully helped Golfball, Tennis Ball and Rocky get comfortable in their lab once more, Robot Flower would lead the others outside.

"Alright everyone- let's help you settle in. There's a lot of houses- we want to make sure that you all can get back into the swing of things."

Freesmart couldn't face the clubhouse anymore.

"We'll be right here, and if there's anything that comes up- don't feel shy to get our attention."

The sight of Fries's garden made his heart drop. That fence- he couldn't help but cover Gelatin's eyes.

"Recovery won't be easy. But we'll do whatever we can to get you through this."

I trudged up the stairs. There was so much in my mind- I just wanted it all to stop.

Everyone looked so... tired. We all had the chance to talk again- but, what

more was there to say..? There was nothing- and all we wanted to do, was rest. Everything hurts. I fought- I really did. But now my body has to pay for that.

I'm happy we can do so now. After everything- I want to be with everyone again. To rest, knowing I can see them tomorrow again.

Jeez- there's snow.

Last time I saw the outside-... it was all so- different...

Was I even here..? Everyone said they watched my recovery- were they lying to me..?

Oh- is this real?

Am I alive...?

'Yes.

'You're here now, dear.

'And personally.... I'd like to welcome you back, my friend.

'We have so much to discuss.'

---

laugh out loud.

hello!

It's been ages since. I had silly authors notes omg.

How is everyone doing? Is everyone enjoying Fear Garden 2 so far? :)

ANYWAYS. Yeah. Cannot believe we're back but that's just me being silly (the adhd was adhding and it won.)

I also finally finished the death order! I can sleep with ease.

OK. Enough of me- thanks for reading!

-ice

Waking Nightmares

The moonlight blanketed over the slumbering Earth below.

A peaceful night in Yoyle City.

Where, at first, the songs of the breeze would keep silence at bay- but tonight, screams pierced through the air, shattering the peaceful illusion of the city.

Ever since the recoveries were made for those who had died, there was a quiet hope that they would be able to get through their haunting past together. They wanted to try and get through it together, with the others offering as much support as they could. But their hopeful outlook on them shattered on that first night- their screams disturbing everyone's peaceful slumbers.

And while some could simply shrug it off, tossing and turning until their exhaustion tuned the screams of terror from their minds, others were too worried to try and ignore the cries that echoed beyond the walls.

Some needed help- beyond their own.

Unfortunately, they refused to listen.

The screams of the team that she had gotten to know reverberated around the walls of Book's bedroom. From Pencil's, to Bubble's- Match's to Ruby's- each shriek and wail prevented her from getting the rest she needed.

These past two weeks had been unimaginably difficult. From their recoveries, to the readjustment of living once more, the shadows of their past still continued to roam freely through the city.

Book swore, she could see Needle by the abandoned museum- and

the two scientists respectfully standing by Golfball's underground factory. What was once their normal, now plaguing their exhausted minds as they began to tread through the waters of recovery.

When they had emerged from the lab, Pencil decided that the best plan of action would be to find a new house to live in. She didn't specify why- but the Freesmarters knew that Match wouldn't have the fortitude to try and set foot into their beloved clubhouse again.

Nobody objected. Even if the house they chose was, in their eyes, *so* ten years ago.

The first steps into a new house should carry the hopes of a fresh start, a positive outlook on the future of one's own life. But with the Freesmarters, their steps signified the beginning of a nightmare, one that they would never be able to wake up from.

Such as tonight. Book used to wake up the way they did- screaming, kicking, even punching the wall in her sleep- but with time, she taught herself to swallow that fear, keeping her screams locked within the chamber of her petrified heart.

Getting used to the screams didn't take too long, but tonight?

Tonight was different.

Her heart was throbbing within her chest, slamming back and forth against her pages with her repressed emotions being locked within. She could push against it- she shut herself up many times before. It shouldn't be any different now.

But life- life. How could it be so unfair?

She sacrificed it all in order to keep the others safe.

She gave it her all to try and keep their spirits from falling into the grasp of darkness.

She was there for everyone- she shared their fears, even cradling the extra weight of their pains so they could have a moment to breathe.

But it had all been for nothing. Seeing as to how she was brushed

aside twice, Book couldn't help but let the volcano of rage seethe within her.

It wasn't fair.

They all had someone. Someone that they could lean on, no matter what.

There was someone there to listen to them.

Her?

She had nothing.

She had no one. And she didn't know why.

What did she do?

What could she do?

How could she finally escape the crater of loneliness that sunk deeper and deeper into the Earth below?

She still had such a hope.

A hope that blazed in the deepest parts of her spine, tucked away neatly in the plethora of pages she had within her.

A hope that Ruby would have stayed with her.

But such an illusion served as a painful reminder for her- a reminder of what would have never been, back then, and towards the future.

For the first time in weeks, Book's wails joined the chorus of agony from the Freesmarter's home.

Knocking on the door, Pen crossed his arms, letting his feet kick at the snow on the steps. He had promised that he would help him with Pencil tonight- and with her screams being heard in the distance, he knew that he didn't have much time to waste.

"Tree," he called, "Come on!"

Inside, Tree was getting everything he needed. He knew that he needed to help- in any way that he could. After seeing the damage that had been caused by that thumbtack, he began to realize the terrors that were behind death.

Now? He wanted to prevent it- as best as he could. And helping the others was how he would start.

Tree makes gentle work of draping the blankets over Bottle. Her sleepy giggles fill his heart with such sweetness, as his hands would brush against the cheek of his lover. The cries from the far distance filled his veins with an icy shock- but being here with his dearest, was enough to melt that concern into comfort.

Bottle lifted herself from the bed, that contagious smile of hers telling him enough. The sheets that he had neatly tucked over her, slid down her body, and Tree shook his head with a soft sigh, pressing a kiss onto her forehead.

"Come back to sleep," the woman smiled, exhaustion below that familiar glimmer in her eyes, "It's really late..."

"I'm going to help Pen- remember?" Tree uttered, carefully wrapping a new blanket around her.

"But- it's dark..."

"I promised him I'd help with his sister- those screams are my cue, dear."

"Aww..."

"Hey." He carefully cradled her hands, placing a gentle kiss on the

back of them. "I won't be gone for long. I want to do my best and help a little more- especially with the others. You understand, don't you..?"

"Unfortunately... but it's gonna get lonely here.." She pouted, clutching the blanket close. "I know you really want to help... but I'm worried you'll ignore your own needs..."

One moment, she could be the silliest woman on the planet, but in the other- oh, Bottle knew when everything meant business. Tree was someone who she held nearest and dearest to her- and she'd be damned if she'd let anyone walk all over him.

But Tree, oh Tree- he would notice the fire in her eyes, and immediately take her in for a gentle embrace, letting every ounce of love and care melt its way into her. Her roots of care seeped into his garden, sprouting rosebuds of love as he tried to comfort her.

He cleared his throat, and before he knew it, he began to sing.

"Let's go in the garden,

You'll find something waiting,

Right there where you left it, lying upside down..."

The warmth of his voice, filling Bottle's mind with the honey of his smooth melodies. She could feel that twinge of worry being lulled- oh, she knew his tricks- but she couldn't help but sink into his warmth, taking in the song.

"When you finally find it, you'll see how it's faded,

The underside is lighter when you turn it around,"

Pen's bothered voice faded as Tree's song blanketed over the world around them. No wails, no nightmares- just the two of them, enveloping one another into their enamored world.

"Everything stays, right where you left it

Everything stays, But it still changes

Ever so slightly, daily and nightly

In little ways, when everything stays..."

Quiet. No words came from the two- instead, a gentle hush that carried the weight of reassurance towards one another. Tree would carefully pull away, letting his hand cradle her cheek.

"I know you're worried, but I'll be okay." He smiled, nuzzling the side of her face. "How's about this- I help Pen tonight, and I rest with you tomorrow. I take a break from helping the others for a bit- and, we could even take those walks together."

"I thought those were your walks?"

Well. She wasn't wrong- after being cooped up in darkness for so long, Tree needed a plethora of sunlight to maintain himself. He would often let Bottle join him, but after she had nearly shattered herself after balancing on a stone....

"They are- but, I don't want to leave you here- we promised we'd spend more time with each other, after all..."

"Aww, but we already are!"

Tree smiled. There weren't enough words to describe the love he had for this woman; she was practically the sun that illuminated his quiet life. With every moment that passed, and every kiss that they shared, countless galaxies sparked into life, emitting the glow of their stars of care and passion into the worlds that they have created.

It was so much- and Tree was so blessed to be a part of her life, and to have her be within his.

"I'll be back before you know it, okay? I love you."

"Dawww- I love you too, Tree!"

Waving, Tree would make his way out of the room, letting Bottle snuggle back into the sheets below, the moonlight shimmering with its lullabies as it shimmered against her surface.

The aura of the stars was once a sight that comforted Fries.

Well- not comforted- moreso, it served as a gentle reminder of the passing day, bringing the quiet reminder of a fresh, new day. The chill of the night kept the pesky critters of his potato garden at bay, and he would make sure to do a final check on their progress, before he called it a night.

This was all a nightly routine of his, before a new garden overtook Yoyle City.

One that would never leave his mind- no matter how many hours he spent working outside, or taking care of his family within the comfort of his home.

Day after day, he would move in silence. As the night fell, the sight of that damned garden plagued his exhausted mind, and in those moments where the rays of the moon guided him into the eternal universe of slumber, that face- *her* face- would send him right back to consciousness, where his racing heart and shivering body would welcome him. And if it wasn't his own nightmares that woke him, it was the screams of those he once knew- in worst cases, the damned screams of his own family.

Conflicts of this would pile up, one after the other. The first nights were the hardest, with Gelatin unable to hear the sound of his closest friend. His voice, which once soothed him and sparked an endless joy to glow within him, was now muted by the vivid memory of the fence protruding his own chest.

Well- it was between that, or the way Pin waved goodbye, as he fell from the roof that now stood over him, but either or had the same

outcome: screaming. The only cohesive words that came from Gelatin's wails were Fries' name, and Fries's name only.

Puffball, on the other hand, was a case that would bring Fries to the edge of his breaking point. There was now way he could ever admit it- this was his LOVER for tater's sake. And no matter what happened, Fries would never find himself bothered by the woman who carried his heart.

But the way her screams snapped him from the silence of the night always shook him to his deepest core.

Since the day they had all returned, she hadn't flown once. In fact- she refused to lift herself into the dangers of open air once more, as her death had been so sudden, that the faith of the world around her plummeted into nothing. During the day, when Fries let her settle within his carton, he could hear her hushed pleas, begging him to stay alert of his surroundings.

From his sons' screams, to his wife's terrified whispers, it was all a harsh reminder of the broken reality that was created by the daugh- no, the stranger, that he wished he knew. A multitude of demons clung onto his line of sight, poisoning his mind with the sights of his past that would never leave- no matter how hard he tried to hide them away.

Puffball's body. Gelatin's body.

They are here now.

Their lifeless eyes.

They are safe.

Are they, now?

No. None of that.

He took it upon himself to keep them safe. After all, he had lost them; on the same day, in the same hour, after he let himself get carried away by the world around him. It was a mistake that cost them their precious lives, and he swore, with all of his tatered heart, that this

would never happen again.

Now, here they were. The screams of the people he competed with, filling the night sky, with the winds of winter carrying the somber reminders of the path they must trek through.

Thankfully, Fries's family were not a part of this chaos; Gelatin was, from what he knew, fast asleep in his room. Puffball was on the bed that they shared together, her quiet breaths serving as a reminder of her living, beating heart.

Sighing, he held his face in his hands, letting his eyes gaze upon the thousands of scars that were scattered in the canvas of the sky. Each one held a different story; a different soul, or perhaps, a different wish, granted by an object on this very planet, and its aura was enough to tell whether its wish had been completed, or if it needed to be held- for it wasn't the right time.

Wasn't the right time.

He never understood how it couldn't have been the right time. He was a man who was down-to-earth, his head far from the clouds, with his priorities set and straight. When something needed to get done, he was on the case- he could never sit around and let others take over.

Jokes? Absolutely not. There was a time and a place for such silliness, and it was never around him. Life was never a game to him, but instead, it was a challenge, where he had to compete to get to where he wished to be. Laziness? Don't get him started.

Fries came to accept this long ago. Yet, as time went on, he couldn't help but find himself surrounded by objects who didn't take it all as seriously as he did. From silly, to insane- he had to learn how to endure it, without losing his mind in the process. And he hated to admit it, but he was starting to... enjoy it?

He couldn't. He knew he couldn't, but he did. And look at where that got him.

Glancing down at the scars on his wrists, he carefully adjusted his

hands- wincing at every crack from the chronic pain (damned pain never went away), trying to get this tension out of himself. He didn't notice that a familiar ball of pink fluff was carefully sitting herself up, blinking the sleepiness out of her eyes as she realized that his warmth was no longer beside her.

Puffball wasn't sure where he was- but the moonlight guided her eyes to him, her heart now beating with a little more ease at the realization.

He didn't leave. Not at all- he was still there.

But this was still... unlike him.

"Fries..?" Her harmonic voice showered through the silence of the room, catching his attention.

"Puff..?" Fries frowned, walking back towards the bed in which his lover resided. "Is everything okay?"

"I thought you left... what were you doing..?"

"Couldn't sleep. It was just the screaming again."

"Is Gelatin okay..?"

"Still asleep, thankfully. Must be the Freesmarters again..."

"Fries... come back to bed, you look exhausted."

"I might take a walk."

"At night..?"

"What? Is that a problem?"

Puffball gave him a look. Yes, she did just wake up- her mind was still trapped in that haze and she still needed to wake herself up- but Fries's stubbornness never failed to make her frustrated.

"Fries," she pleaded, "Come back to bed."

"No- I'm fine."

"Are you??"

"Just said so."

"I can't fly to you right now. But I can tell, without seeing you, that you're lying."

Silence. She could tell Fries was holding back from responding- she couldn't hold it against him. When her heart realized that he was the one, she knew that she would embrace every part of him- the good, the bad, and the ugly.

And as she found herself seeing more and more of him, she realized just how beautiful the ugly was. Having the capacity to feel and embrace one's own emotions, were what made every single one of them, object beings. With every laugh, there was a cry- and without one, there would never be the other.

Yet, she quickly noticed a lack of the negative. Not anger, of course. She always noticed how Fries would argue with the others. But sadness...?

The first time she had seen him cry, was on the day of their recovery. Even then- he would refuse to mention, or at least, acknowledge it.

It worried her to death.

"I'm worried about you, Fries." She began, letting her voice ease off of the frustration. "You've been acting off ever since-"

"I've been taking care of you two." Fries interrupted, glaring at the sky.

"And we appreciate it, I promise you. But you had to carry EVERYTHING since day one, and we- I-.. I haven't been there to help you. You lasted longer than the others, I can't imagine what you had to endure!"

That alone made Fries turn to face her. She was expecting him to be frustrated- to try and turn it all around to focus on herself and

Gelatin- but her heart dropped when she noticed the tears in his eyes, the stars reflecting off of them.

"..What I went through.. It.. doesn't matter." He uttered, fighting the cry that swelled in his throat. "I lost both of you, and because of that, I-."

Quickly, Puffball cut him off. "I know you're hurting too!"

"That doesn't-"

"It DOES. You are here for EVERY SINGLE object- you were the one who made sure they all had a place to stay?! And for us?! Not only are you caring for Gelatin- but you're having to deal with his troubles, as well as mine!

"You deserve a chance to ask for help, Fries! It doesn't make you any less of who you are now! And if I have to be the one to help- so be it! But please,

"If you keep ignoring this, it could spiral into something so much worse. I'm still terrified of everything that happened- and- I-.." gritting her teeth, she could feel the tears flooding her vision, "..I'm scared that, if this keeps going on- I'll lose you too."

No words were needed from there. Walking back to the bed, Fries would immediately embrace the woman, tears glistening down his tired face as the softness of her fuzz kept his sobs at bay.

He didn't want to admit it- but with everything that happened... he couldn't ignore it anymore. It ate away at his mind for so long, and he had only held back to avoid being vulnerable. After all- Life spared nobody. It would find a way to make him regret it.

But just by the look on his face, Puffball could tell that he got the message. He knew that now, the path of healing would be a path that they would face together. No matter what, they would be there for each other, and they would never lose each other, ever again.

What eased Puffball's worries more, was when she saw Fries bury his face into her head, a tiny smile curving on his face.

"You always find a way to make me feel uncivilized," Fries chuckled, letting his hands sink beneath her pink fuzz, "Can't we talk about life..."

With every touch, he could feel their souls brushing against one another, the collision creating an explosion of stars which would carry the dreams that they shared, together. Countless rings encapsulated their planet of love, laying the paths of their union to, perhaps, the joyful promises that the future held.

He found himself melting. It flustered him- hell, in the beginning, it angered him- for he wasn't supposed to fall in love. That's how life was supposed to be, wasn't it?

But as he lost himself in her multicolored eyes, he could feel the tension in his body dissipating. All of his anger, his regrets and frustrations would vanish, cleansing him with the waterfall of love that showered upon him, every time her eyes met his. The millions of thoughts that raced in his mind would begin to come to a stop, and his heart would beat with a loving melody, a tempo that unionizes with the beats of her own.

Love was weird. But Fries found himself head over heels, so long ago- and maybe, just maybe, he could try to step back, and embrace the journey that led him here.

The journey that led to her.

His Puffball.

Giggling, Puffball leaned in, pressing her soft lips against his cheek.

"What's there to say...? Life's right here, next to me..."

You'd think they'd be used to the screaming by now.

Two weeks. Two whole weeks, and their sleep has been continuously interrupted by the screams of the recovered. It didn't help that they were all close together- they wanted to try and make them feel like a community.

Instead, they were a choir, singing the operas of tortured souls.

Lollipop felt a twinge of guilt as she realized how annoyed she was getting. Sitting up, she groaned sleepily, trying to let her eyes adjust to the darkness of the room. The moonlight poured from the crack of the curtains, carrying the screams of those outside- and this made her sigh out of pure annoyance.

They had forgotten to close the window.

Hey, don't blame Lollipop. It was her who asked if they could keep it open (just a smidge, as she said). The houses themselves were strangely warm, with their heating systems (somehow) functioning. There was no way to turn it off, and the poor woman was growing snappier as the air was stuffy and humid, bringing out a different side to the woman.

Thankfully, Taco had no objections. She was used to the heat, but when she noticed the sudden change in Lollipop's character, she immediately suggested that they open the windows, in order to let the humidity out, and bring that comforting chill in.

She quickly learned to regret that decision now. Albeit- Taco was a heavy sleeper, but the screams usually had the lollipop tossing and turning, struggling to get any second of rest.

Quietly, Lollipop heaved herself from the bed. She trudged over, carefully brushing the curtains to the side in order to shut the window for the night, but that's when she saw it.

Well- more like, saw him.

She knew that their new neighbors had a thing for gardening. It was

the first thing Lollipop noticed- that area of freshly dug dirt, weeds snaking around every bump and curve, and old plants, withering away from the cold. The fence had a fresh sheet of snow blanketing over it- with one of the stakes being stained with a deep red and green stain.

That was just the first day. After that, Lollipop could only catch glimpses of a carton of fries, immediately working away at the garden. Strangely enough, the first thing he did was take down the fence- if it were her, personally, she would've started by dealing with those damned weeds.

Now, two ghostly posts stood in the exposed yard. There was still a plethora of work to be done, but she quickly learned that their new neighbors were the ones who were freshly recovered.

Brushing past it, her eyes fell upon that green guy- that gelatin- who was silently leaning out of his window, his eyes locked onto the night sky. Clouds lazily drifted over the stars and the moon, occasionally blocking the beams of light that they'd offer.

How strange. Usually, she'd be hearing screams coming from their house, but tonight, there was nothing of the sort. Lollipop puckered her lips, deep in her thoughts as she tried to remember the recovery of that gelatin guy, but when his eyes were locked onto hers, she immediately straightened herself out.

They saw each other. No doubt about it.

Sympathy dawned on Lollipop's face, before she lifted her hand, giving it a slight wave. Gelatin would do the same- except, a twinge of hesitancy as he watched himself lift his hand up. It was a slow wave that he gave, and the moonlight reflected the harsh scar that painted his wrist.

So many questions, ones she desperately wanted to find the answers to. What did he have to endure?

And why did she *care* so much?

Sure as hell wasn't for anything romantic. The idea of being with a

man made Lollipop cringe, every. Single. Time.

There was something that called to her- an urge to care, to still be the woman she was, but guide him through the troubles that clouded his visions. A... familiar feeling, perhaps?

Her thoughts continued, but a familiar voice soon called to her.

"Lolli..." Taco murmured, shifting underneath the covers as she sleepily reached for the empty spot beside her.

That's her cue. She carefully shut the window, grabbing the curtains to close them once more before she looked over.

Just as quickly as he appeared, he had left.

"Piiin!"

"Yes, Coiny?"

"Where are you going?! We promised Fries we'd meet him by the canal!"

"Don't worry about me, now. Besides- I won't be long!"

"Aw, boo! Can't it wait until later? We can head down together!"

"I cant."

"Pin- cmoon... your co-captain needs ya here..."

"I can't, Coiny."

"Why?"

"..Because i'm not here."

"..what..?"

"..I'm not ok, Coiny.. I can't kiss you...I can't kiss you... because I'm not here."

"No... Pin..-"

"I know you killed yourself... you took that trowel out of my hands, and plunged it right through your heart... my.. you didn't think I could try and do it myself, did you.."

"Pin.."

"..I was hurt, Coiny.. I tried to fight it... I really did... but.. Nobody.. Nobody tried to help me..."

"PIN!"

"And you were so afraid of being alone.."

Grab her- no- no, DON'T GO! PIN!!

"...that you made yourself turn away."

The damned pillowcase greeted Coiny's sight, as his eyes snapped open from the slumber he had slipped into. Tears had formed into a puddle on the side, with his cheeks glimmering from the light outside.

Again. It happened again. When could the night give him a break?

He'd much rather have the screams than this.

Speaking of- he could hear them coming from outside. Now that he had left his old house, Firey and Leafy were quick to welcome him with open arms, letting him stay in the house that they chose together.

They couldn't imagine how he was feeling- so there was no way in Goiky they'd leave him on his own.

Reaching towards the lamp on the bedside table, Coiny watched as the darkness fled from the light that filled its path. The room itself wasn't anything too fancy, just enough to call it home, but it served as a painful reminder, every time he woke up.

He wasn't back home. Pin wasn't next to him.

The past had died- and the future had him by his limbs, yanking him away from the blissful memories that soothed his aching heart.

He knew he shouldn't. Everyone was telling him that he shouldn't- the damage she had caused was beyond irreversible, so much so that it was permanently etched into their object forms. But, even with this, Coiny couldn't help it.

He missed Pin.

Because unlike the others, the memory of who she once was clashed against the reveal of who she became to be. The two had clicked instantly, spending their days as a pair as they would find their ways to beat life's challenges together.

Watching her bloom and grow as a person was something indescribably beautiful to him. Sure, the two of them were their own object, each having varying flaws and fears- but the fact that they could develop and face these fears together, was so touching to him- and it all had shattered, when he walked into that garden.

He shouldn't.

But he does.

The tears couldn't stop. Shivering, he swung his legs to the edge of the bed, clutching his aching chest as he tried to catch his breath. He failed to notice how hard he was sobbing, and unfortunately, the footsteps approaching his door didn't.

When Firey's face emerged on the other side, he expected the usual teasing to begin. It's what he was used to- the rivalry the two had never seemed to have a break, even when they tried to call it off. It was like an undying flame, forever flickering through the winds that tried to keep it at bay.

"Didn't expect to hear screaming from this room." Firey chuckled under his breath, walking towards the bed.

"Sorry." Was all Coiny could mutter, his eyes falling away from the flame. He didn't have the energy to try and fight- he barely had the energy to answer him.

There was no need to try, though. Firey could already tell. "You don't have to be."

"I do."

"Coiny- trust me. We can hear the Freesmarters from here. In fact- we can hear EVERYONE from here. You don't have to hide it, because you guys came back from something brutal. Do you want to talk?"

Oh, how he wished he didn't have to hide it now. He shot the guy a glance, his lips pressed together tightly, as if the truth would burst from him- similarly to a balloon.

But the longer he gazed into Firey's orange pupils (clashing with his now metal body), he couldn't help but feel a sense of ease. It was not only a reminder of the nightmare that was far from over, but pushing aside the rivalry between them, he felt a sense of trust.

An aura so comforting, he couldn't tell if it was from the grief, or just from Firey himself. The two had spent ages of their lives together, bickering and fighting like actual two year olds. Despite this- they always found themselves together.

No matter how much he denied it, he realized now that they had also grown as objects, together.

...

Maybe he would understand.

Could he?

Wouldn't Firey freak out if he mentioned what he's feeling? Telling him how his heart still ached from the missing piece of its puzzle, a piece that he had grown to adore and love so deeply, that he couldn't

find any fragment of peace, knowing that she's gone?

He had died first- died by her hands, as she shoved the poor guy from the cage he was imprisoned in. He was the first to go, and it was clear that the nightmares that haunted the others (including Coiny himself), were not plaguing Firey's mind.

At least- he could assume so. For the past two weeks, he could hear Firey desperately comforting Leafy, who, like the others, had awoken as a screaming mess. These episodes varied, with some of them ending in mere seconds, and others lasting for hours. There was a night where she was violently clawing at a pillow, and Firey desperately tried to call her from the night terror she was having.

Yet, the weeks went by, and these episodes began to diminish more and more. Leafy assured them that she was a-ok, but those panic attacks of hers said otherwise.

Even with this, would Firey still offer a lending hand..?

"Hey, dummy. I'm not a mind reader here."

Crap, Coiny winced. He looked back up at him, finding himself in the path of those blazing eyes, once more.

"I... I think I need to be honest here."

"About what?" Firey questioned, leaning back.

"About- everything.."

"Well, I'm here aren't I? Do your thing."

There was a silence that hung over the two, with the faint cries lingering from the outside. The words that Coiny wanted to say contorted around his doubts and fears, tangling themselves into the tightest knots that clogged his mind from processing anything.

And what if he gets mad?

I miss her.

You could get in trouble.

I miss her.

They could banish you from the city.

I miss her.

Is it worth risking your reputation over this???

....

"Firey.." Coiny croaked, the floodgates now swinging open as the tears began to flood his vision. It immediately caught Firey's attention, and he sat up, worriedly placing a hand on his back.

"Woah- Coiny... what's going on..?"

"..I know I shouldn't. Please believe me when I say that, I know I shouldn't be feeling this way. With everything that happened- everyone deserves to be angry. Hell, I deserve to be angry! The nightmare I had to endure, watching all of you die, one by one- it's never going to leave! And I'm furious by it!"

The words spilled like a flood, ripping through the city of his emotions and tainting the waters with every emotion he tried to repress. Grimacing, Coiny clenched the bed sheets beneath him, his voice now beginning to warble as his cries snapped his few strings of stability.

"But... even with this anger, I feel so sad. Sad that I didn't notice it sooner. I knew Pen was right- if I had managed to snap out of myself, I could've made an effort to stop it."

"Coiny.."

"Whats worse, is that I can't feel angry anymore." Coiny's voice fell into a hush. "Instead- I'm left with this... emptiness. It sticks with me, and no matter what I try to do, it never goes away. Every night, I pray that I can at least get a dream where this massacre never happened- but.. the only thing that I can see is her...

"My Pin.

"And I... I can't hold it back anymore, Firey. I'm sorry. But... I miss her."

Anger. Guilt. Sadness. Relief. The emotions flashed through Coiny's aching soul as his body twitched, the sobs escaping his throat before he could realize it.

Carrying the consequences of before was nothing short of agonizing- but he and Pin had grown so close to one another, to a point where Coiny believed that he was hers, and she was his. They were twin flames- everything about them fit perfectly into the equation of their relationship.

Now, here he was. His partner in crime, his right hand woman, his W.O.A.H Bunch captain one year strong...

Gone.

To his surprise, he could feel Firey's arm wrapping around his shivering body. It wasn't much, but the gesture alone made Coiny sob even harder, leaning against his metal body as the pain crashed like waves against him.

He felt guilty for feeling this way.

But it hurt.

And this pain made him drown, dragging him deeper into the sea of grief, never to see the surface of hope ever again.

The two would stay this way for a while, with Firey holding Coiny, and Coiny sobbing his little copper heart out. Words weren't a necessity, that is, until Coiny lifted himself away, his eyebrows furrowing together from the headache that was beginning to develop.

Firey could immediately note this, helping him adjust. "Coiny- here, I can get you some water..."

"Everyone tells me that I need to move on," Coiny wiped his eyes, shivering from the emotions that crashed against his soul, ".. But I can't."

"Coiny.." Firey tried to reach for him, but the coin turned his shoulder, shamefully burying his face into the palms of his hands.

"I miss her, Firey." He sobbed. "I miss her so much.."

"I know. I could hear you the first time..."

"I just... I feel guilty... for feeling this way..."

Guilty. The word rang in the back of Firey's mind, as he let his mind drift into the memories of the past.

There was a part of him that didn't want to console him- in fact, he wanted to slap him, just to knock some sense into that tiny brain of his! Here he was, crying over someone who was nothing short of a snake, someone who killed him, as well as everyone she knew and loved, for some stupid garden.

But the more that he thought, the more he began to realize how similar the two were.

When the hang glider had crashed- Firey stood by and watched as the others chased Leafy away. He remembered how, when they had hit the ground, he wasn't sure if he should stay or flee with her- but the decision that he had made, continued to haunt him, even to this day.

He could never forget the way Leafy's eyes looked that day, when she realized that he wasn't coming with her.

What Pin had done is far beyond stealing some dumb island- but those pains, the aching sensation of losing the one you had loved for so long- Firey realized now that fighting wouldn't do him any good.

"Coiny," he began, gently helping the coin wipe his tears, "While I do get why you're feeling this way, you shouldn't have to hide this pain

from us- from me."

"But... but she-"

"I know what she did to me. And, if I'm honest- I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive her. But out of everyone here... you knew Pin the most. In fact, when you two met, you both became inseparable! There was nothing that could stop you guys from facing the world."

"I-... what are you t-trying to-"

"Listen. That guilt you're feeling- I felt it once. Maybe not as bad as this- but it was still there. And after everything that happened, you have to understand that patching things up is going to be impossible. Especially since she had hurt the others. But- this is someone you lost."

Coiny lifted his head. "Lost..?"

"Well. Yeah, she's dead. But not only did you lose her physically... you lost the Pin you once loved." Firey couldn't help but scoff, his eyes rolling slightly. "We could all see the way your eyes would glow when you were with her. Yet, when you realized what she had done- that gleam in your eyes had long vanished.

"She was everything to you. And the fact that she did something like this, made you realize that it was too good to be true."

Sobs. Coiny covered his face, crumbling as Firey carefully held him close.

"This sadness shouldn't be something you hide. You have to let it run its course- otherwise... man- things could get ugly, real fast."

"H-How am I supposed to let it run its course- if... the others won't... agree..?" Shuddering, Coiny struggled to get a proper breath of air, sobs breaking through his aching airways.

Firey thought for a moment. "...Well- we can try and get you to express this sadness in a different way. You know- coping skills..!"

"Coping skills..?"

Nodding, Firey would lift Coiny from his arms, holding his shoulders gently as he locked himself into those copper-colored eyes of his.

"When Leafy and I were... uh... apart... I tried to hide the guilt I felt for so long. It took so much out of me- and even worse, it was starting to make me crack, right as BFDIA was going strong. I realized that if I kept trying to ignore the way that I felt, then I... would have done something stupid."

"Sounds like the Firey I know..."

"LIKE I WAS SAYING. I realized that hiding that guilt and sadness was practically killing me- so... I started to write."

"Write?"

"As in- write letters. Whenever I had the chance, I would write letters to Leafy- as if she were there, listening to the words that I put on paper."

Giving his shoulders a gentle squeeze, Firey would then get up, walking over to a small desk on the other side of the room. Coiny watched, with his tear-stained face, as Firey would rummage through the desk, the soft clinking and banging echoing through the silence before he closed it once more.

He knew that these homes were left untouched. They had just what they needed, and right now, Firey was thankful that they had enough to last in the room that they had lent to Coiny.

With his hands behind his back, Firey walked back towards him, letting him stare up with an expression that read of both, hope, as well as "what the hell are you doing".

"I know- this might sound really cheesy, but, if something like this could help me..."

Firey held his hands out, both of them cradling a blank notebook, a pencil, and a pen.

"...Maybe it could help you, too."

I awoke to the sound of the voice.

"Rise and shine, dear! We've got work to do!"

I hope she couldn't read my mind. Carefully, I got myself off of the bed, making sure to not wake-

"Aren't you excited? Oh, I'm telling you- it all gets better from here!"

It doesn't. I know it doesn't.

I left our room, quietly shutting the door before I made my way through the halls. I had to check three times to make sure everything was in its place- there was no room to try and mess up.

"The yoylite- do you have it?"

'Right here.' I carefully lift the two halves. They glowed at night- sometimes, during the day too- and every time I held it, I could feel a little calmer.

"Wonderful!~"

Why did she have to use that singing tone of hers...

Besides- taking it was anything but wonderful. I didn't want it all to be this way- everyone was still on edge, and I know that this missing stone would make it worse, especially in the state that it's in.

I was told that breaking it into two wouldn't change a thing. But I thought of Golfball; I could practically feel her anger. She's just a force to be

reckoned with, even with how short she was.

I grabbed the car keys, and in that instant, we were off. I watched as our house vanished behind me, following the rest of the houses in the city. And soon, we were here.

I remember it all. The Freesmart Supervan.

Unlike the yoylite, I knew it'd be easier to snatch the keys. And with the others separating the glue from the engine, she came to find that it was now in working order.

Unfortunately.

Getting into the van, I watched my step, not wanting to leave anything out of the ordinary. It was clear that the van was used after everything, with tire marks staining the ground surrounding it. She told me that it'd be hard to link it back- after all, it was just another path in that maze of marks.

I turned the key, and the hum of the engine filled my mind. Just a simple drive at night. Nothing more.

Don't think of it as anything else.

"What- no music?"

'Do you want us to get caught.'

"Wow- smart, too! I knew you'd be a good fit..."

Hearing that made me shudder.

I wish I was dead. I really wish something could knock me dead, right on the spot.

But... nothing would.

"Need me to go over everything one more time...?"

...

"I'll take it as a yes! Once you're at the edge of the city, park the van and get to looking! I'll tell you which one would work best- my garden needs a LOT of saving after those monsters burned it all down.

"Once we find 'em? That trowel- oh, it's going to be your new best friend. Find a way to knock 'em out, and keep them quiet. Once you get them back in the van- well... we will go from there, my friend.

Hmf...

"Huh- and who taught you how to drive...?"

'Cars exist beyond here, you know...'

"Hey- I haven't left this place in AGES. I don't know the places you've been through! Unless you'd like to take me out sometime..."

'No.'

"Yeesh... tough crowd."

Quiet. She's finally quiet. Why can't she get it? I don't want to talk to her.

She is not my friend. Especially with what I had to do- because of her.

I turned into the road that led into the city, and when I look up, I see-

"HIM!!"

'What-'

"HIM. THATS THE ONE WE NEED. Why couldn't it cross my mind before- scratch the plan, HE'S the one we're going for!~"

'And how am I supposed to-'

"UGH. WATCH AND LEARN."

Suddenly, a numbness pricked in my fingertips, quickly spreading to the rest of my arms.

I lost control.

No- I shouldn't- these are MY hands! How-

Wait-

My foot slammed against the gas pedal, and the buildings around us sped by. I couldn't stop the scream that came out of my mouth;

I had no control.

No control.

And I watched as the tall object jump, scrambling to the side and barely avoiding the hull of the van.

Silence. Not even a scream- his panicked breaths being the first thing to

return to me.

Why would she- how- She never told me she could DO THIS.

'NEVER DO THAT AGAIN! WHAT IS-'

"He saw you."

'What-'

"He saw you."

I could see his eyes. I wasn't sure if it was terror- or anger- but the shock of it all had him trembling, checking himself to make sure nothing was broken.

He knew.

He knew now, I-

No. I can't- this isn't who I was, I promise-

I can explain- I could! I know it now, I can try and-

"Remember our deal, now."

I couldn't-

"If my garden is not completed..."

The failed pact.

The threats.

She'd...

My blood ran cold, as I realized that there was no turning back.

Not anymore.

I'm so sorry.

I'm sorry, Tree.

He was starting to run.

I can't let him go.

Turn. Block. And go.

Get him out of the city.

Run in the other direction.

I know what it feels like.

That expression was once mine, too.

I know you'd never believe it- especially after what I'm doing now.

He knows he can't go in.

Running up the hill, the same hill that led to the mountain.

Nobody could hear it now.

I swerved the wheel, flooring it as hard as I could. Watching his body grow closer and closer in the blink of an eye, I listened as his body cracked violently from the impact.

A shower of leaves sprinkled around the van. I think the hit sent him tumbling over the roof of the van, since the blood was still there, slowly oozing down the cracked window. I had to check- but I was frozen.

Stuck.

I didn't want him to see me again.

The headlights of the van illuminated the path, the trees towering over the sky and blocking the moon from touching its ground.

Seems like it knew too. No light would dare to shine in a place like this.

He calls for someone. I can't make out what he had said, but I would shakily reach over, tilting the rear view mirror to see if he was where I thought he'd be.

Oh.

There he stayed. Right where they had left him.

He stayed right on the path- his body, changed forever.

Should a body contort that way?

How is his leg twisted that way- how could it-

"Don't focus too much on that now. Think of it as... a dying rat."

'How could-'

"Look at him! His twitching, his shivering- the guy can barely keep his EYES open, hah!"

His arm was hanging by a chunk of his own flesh. The muscles- I could see them spasming, unable to reach the severed half. The bone had been broken off, bits of it scattered on the ground.

I had seen it all.

Over and over again.

But this...

"Come on- we've got a job to finish."

A job to finish.

The blood pooled on the ground below Tree.

A job to finish.

His femur protruded from his leg, small flakes of skin and shredded leaves dangling from the bone, which was now stained with blood and dirt.

A job to finish.

I think I can hear his wails.

My hands couldn't stop shaking. I grabbed the joystick, yanking it to the glowing 'R' mark, and stomped against the pedal with all my might.

I waited.

Until the sound of a shattering skull filled the air around me, blood and brain matter squelching against the rubber tires.

---

valentines day!!! its my holiday. I love valentines day (lovecore RULES!!!!)

also. ICE WRITE CHAPTERS IN LESS THAN 4K WORDS CHALLENGE (INSTANTLY FAILED) (COPS CALLED) (SOMEONE DIED?!??!?!!)

anyways hello there!! how is everyone today?

there was a blizzard that hit yesterday and I got the day off, so I actually had a chance to SLEEP IN. Shocking.

I also had time to adjust things to the story! That includes the death list- so far, #2 and #3 swapped! Hope y'all have room for dessert (no, its not a food object).

I'm also trying to stick with a good release schedule. Doing this every other day is, something- I might try doing weekly or bi-weekly drops for now. It honestly depends on college.

Anyways, I need to go celebrate Valentine's Day. Me and the bestie core (and the partner)!!!

bye!!

-ice

XoXo

Dear Pin,

You're the enemy. You're... my enemy. You always will be- I should know that now. And, even after all this time, I had hope- hope that you would stop, hope that you'd turn around to see the mess you've created, and hope that you would end the killing spree.

I wish I had hope now. My hope is gone, and It makes me so sad. Unbelievably sad. Because I miss you, Pin. After everything, I will always miss you.

I had a dream about you yesterday. I have dreams about you, every day. And in each one, you were still here. You were mine, and I could hear your voice in the back of my head, comforting the pain of my broken heart.

They say the pain gets better. But every time I wake up, I find myself wishing that I could stay asleep forever.

The others say I shouldn't think this way. They mean well- I know it now. But they never knew you like I did.

Time doesn't make sense when you aren't here. It's been days- weeks- and there's so much I miss about you.

I miss your smile. I miss the gleam in your eye when you turned to me after a successful challenge, or when your newest plants were starting to sprout. I miss laughing with you as we spent our days together through BFDIA, even if we were stuck with Donut, and everyone else.. I miss your endless gardening facts, your pep talks, the rants on the days where you were so, so mad- I even miss the way you snored beside me.

Those are the good things I remember about you. But the bad tainted the image I had- and I'm trying my hardest to hold onto the good. Please

know that. I'm scared that if my hold loosens, these memories of you will leave forever. And it breaks my heart.

I'm sorry it had to be this way. I'm truly sorry.

But if we could start it all over- maybe I could have seen it better. I could have tried to stop you- to help you, and listen.

Why did you do it? Was it the others? Was it life? Did I do something wrong, something so stupid that it made you snap?

Thinking about it makes my heart hurt. Firey told me these letters would help, but my tears are messing up the ink. So much for asking him, right?

Pin, I can't do it. I tried. I don't want to go against the others- but having you gone leaves a hole in my heart, one that won't ever heal, even if I tried.

I miss you.

And even after I do this- I'll still miss you, endlessly.

Maybe these letters will reach you one day. I'm no longer a coward like Firey used to say. I can try.

But even so, you won't be safe here. They would all know. And I can't bear to see you get hurt by them.

The others will ask me why. They'll hate me. But they never knew you like I did. They never experienced the love that we did, together.

Our last Valentines Day will forever be a bitter reminder of what you did. But it will be a bitter reminder of just how much I loved you, and... how much I still love you.

Please don't hate me for what I have to do.

I'll help you.

At least let me help you- one more time. Because nobody knows what they'd do if they brought you back.

This is my job now. And I hope fate can bring us back to each other, once again.

I love you, Pin.

-Coiny

P-I-N.

Helping Hands

⚠ TW: HEAVY GORE. I'll leave a mark around the parts where this goes down, but uh. Please read with caution. ⚠

Also, sorry this is over 9k words guys. IM SORRY!!!!!!!

-

"How many batches have you made?"

"A few dozen! Not all of them are the same!"

"Huh.. I thought they were just.. Bread?"

"..No?! They're all different, silly! Besides- I moved onto the muffins!" Smiling, Saw placed an oven-mitten over her hand, carefully lifting the steaming tray of muffins from within. She placed them on top of the stove, letting them cool off as she turned off the oven.

Beside her, Gaty observed her lover's movements, wanting to help with as much as possible. She wasn't much of a baker herself, but Saw refused to leave her out- not now, and not ever- so she asked if she could give her a helping "hand" with these freshly baked goods of hers.

These weren't for themselves after all.

With ease, Gaty would take the cooled loaves of banana bread and slicing them into pieces, wrapping them in little storage bags. Saw looked down at the steaming batch of muffins on the stove, gathering any fragments of courage she had left.

"That garden they found," she said. "That's why she went after all of them?"

"Yes."

"What did they do to it, then?"

It was a childish question- ridiculous, to say the least- yet, Gaty nodded solemnly. "I think they burned it down. I know that they found it- this was around the time you were exploring- but I saw a cloud of smoke coming from the forest. Judging from where it was... man. I don't know how she could've done it."

"I know that," Saw pouted. "But I do not understand."

"Understand what?"

A chill went up Saw's spine. "I guess... what they found- or, why she did it..."

"Saw... are you sure you want to-"

"Yes, yes! Just tell me!"

"Well, not a lot of objects saw it; I swear, I heard Barf Bag talking about... hands, in the garden? Bodies, too... she told me that Bracelety was the one who found it. I can't imagine how she must be handling it right now."

The steam was beginning to dissipate, with the cold air washing upon their bodies like the waves of the sea. "I thought Pin was nice..."

"The others said she was bossy."

"Do you think they'll bring her back?"

Those periwinkle eyes were locked onto hers. She couldn't help it, but Saw swore that she could find herself becoming lost in the sea of stars within her lovers' eyes. It was enough for a blush to burn at her face, but Gaty shook her head, placing a newly-wrapped loaf on a tray. "I hope not. I don't think I'd feel safe with someone like her existing in the same plane as I am."

"I feel like that wouldn't be fair to- oh, the muffins can be packed, here-"

"Got it!"

"Thanks. Okay, uh- like I was saying, I feel like that wouldn't be fair to the others... the objects who died. Wouldn't they want some sort of vengeance for what she did?"

"It'd be best if we leave that up to them, Saw. After all- we weren't there to experience what they had to live through."

Saw's lips puckered at Gaty's response. She wasn't a violent person, and she never wanted to be. But after hearing the horrific deeds that were executed by that familiar thumbtack, she couldn't help but share that anger and pain that the recovered folks carried. The woman felt horrible, and what was worse, she didn't know how to help them.

When the idea popped up in the midst of a conversation, Gaty was hesitant on the approach. After all, the recoveries they had heard about sounded like they needed help beyond their own. Yet, Saw's eagerness broke the hesitancy, and she decided to give the idea a go, helping her girlfriend with ideas that could aid in the recovery of those who had died before.

The two would work in silence, wrapping up the freshly-baked treats in little boxes and packages before placing them in a basket. A sweetened scent filled the kitchen, and the pile of dishes in the sink served as a reminder for the mess that awaited the two, once they returned.

"Okay..." Saw smiled, carefully placing the last muffin in the basket. "I think I finished! Oh- do you think I made enough?"

"Saw, the kitchen looks like a bakery." Chuckling, Gaty stood up. "We definitely have enough."

"I wanna make sure no one is left out here! I can't remember how many of them there were, so I went with my gut!"

"And your gut told you to make treats for the entirety of the planet?"

"Hey!"

Gaty couldn't help but snicker, taking the playful nudge from the taller woman. She watched as Saw would look back, carefully scooping the basket into her hands and preparing for the journey ahead. There was still a sense of hesitancy that tugged at her own chest- she wasn't sure if this was the best way to go about helping.

Yet, what more could they do as mere neighbors? The recovered would be getting the help that they needed. She was sure that they'd appreciate the help from the new faces in town.

Sighing, Gaty made sure to tidy up the table to the best of her abilities. Blowing off any crumbs and flour dust, she figured it'd be easier for Saw if she could clean some parts of the mess they had made- after all, baking was already a serious effort. She was the one with arms, and Gaty knew that cleaning was going to be a hassle, especially after their journey.

To her surprise, Saw peeked over, flicking a crumb at her face. "What are you doing?"

"Cleaning." Gaty said, "Figured you'd appreciate a little less work when you come back."

"Gaty, come on! I told you I'd be fine with it!"

She'd be fine with it. The words filled Gaty's heart with a sense of unease, looking back over her own 'shoulder'. "...Are you sure you're fine with- doing this?"

"Duh! It was my idea, I have to-"

"Saw, no. Are you sure you're alright with this idea of yours?" Gaty queried, interrupting the other. "I know how much you want to help here- trust me, I admire that from you- but... don't you think the others may find it weird?"

Saw scoffed, eagerly clutching the basket close to her chest. "Babe, come on. There's nothing weird about baking treats for the others! They're all dealing with a lot right now, and I don't think they'd have the energy to try and cook for themselves. Even if they did- a sweet

treat wouldn't hurt to give, right?"

The doubt that once seeped through Gaty's heart quickly began to dissipate. Saw did make a good point there- and when her girlfriend's mind was set, there was no going back. With a simple nod, Gaty would make her way towards her, letting Saw shut the light off as they made their way outside.

Rays of sunshine kissed at their bodies, the gentle warmth permeating through their souls with the winds embracing them in a comforting chill. The two looked up, and with a few steps, they were off on the sidewalk, heading into the endless maze of houses within Yoyle City.

Between each crevice and fold of the abandoned buildings and businesses, an aura of mystery tugged at Gaty's heart. Each house that the two had come across were left perfectly intact- some, of course, messier than the others- but there seemed to be no sign of theft or chaos that signified any hostility. But as the two passed every window and display case, she couldn't help but capture how neatly things were left. Things were still organized, and shelves were stocked to the brim.

It was as if the city was frozen in time, with the ghosts of the past having ascended to the realms beyond.

As the two continued their journey, Saw couldn't help but gasp, turning towards her girlfriend.

"Gaty," she exclaimed. "Maybe we should stop by Teardrop's first!"

"Teardrop.. huh, haven't seen her in a while." Gaty looked up, pouting her lip in thought. "You think she'd like one of the pastries?"

"Duh! Of course she would! C'mon'- we have no time to waste, we still have a lot more deliveries we have to make here!" Saw grinned, happily skipping through the emptied streets of the abandoned city. With a small jump, Gaty immediately skittered after her, making sure none of the baked goods fell from the basket she swung.

"Hey," Gaty frowned. "You're gonna drop everything if you swing it

that way!"

"Boo! Fine.."

"Thank you."

Needle knows that Teardrop is alive. Despite the nightmares, she fights that familiar thumbtack from her vision in order to bring herself back to the present. There was no need to be afraid- there they were, breathing and alive, mere feet away from her. Yet, it's nothing short of a gut-wrenching truth that much of who Teardrop used to be- who they all used to be- had been washed away due to the nightmare that Pin had caused, and the exhaustion that clouded their traumatized minds.

She was terrified. The taller woman felt as if her lover was slipping from her hold, and there was nothing she could do to try and stop it.

Her thoughts continued to swirl endlessly in the back of her mind, before she was snapped back with the mere sound of a weakened groan, and the gentle creak of the mattress. She turned around, her vision welcoming the sight of her girlfriend who had finally managed to get proper sleep.

Her blue eyes, clouded with exhaustion and despondence, glanced up to find Needle staring back at her.

She wastes no time to go and soothe her lover. The taller woman carefully cupped her hands around the water droplet's face, caressing her cheeks with her thumbs as Teardrop leaned into her touch.

"How are you feeling..?" Needle asks quietly. She let her eyes study TD, frowning as she shook her head, clutching her stomach with a wince.

"Is your stomach still bothering you?"

Teardrop gave her a weakened nod.

Needle glanced to the side, a frown growing on her tired face. She had tried to concoct some sort of method to alleviate Teardrop's nausea, going as far to ask TB and GB for advice. But, the two scientists were completely out of it, with GB in the midst of overworking herself, and TB desperately trying to help her from doing so, all while caring for Rocky, who was fighting endless headaches and nightmares with the rest of the group.

It was quick to realize that they all needed to rely on themselves for the time being. So, with that, Needle tried every trick in the book. She grabbed extra bottles of Yoyle-Dry ginger ale (like. Canada Dry. I'm not funny). She plucked yoyle limes from their trees and nabbed some salt and seltzer from the abandoned stores. She even tried the abandoned pharmacies to see what could treat the ailment that plagued her lover.

So far, they were still waking up with nausea. It's been weeks since the recoveries were made, and Needle figured it was best to vary each treatment to ease her lover back into health.

Carefully, Needle pressed her lips against Teardrop's forehead. "Here-go wait for me in the living room. I'll get you some of that lime-seltzer, okay..?"

Teardrop shut her eyes, nodding once more before trudging back towards the familiar blue living room.

She was surprised to find it spotless when they returned from their recovery. It seemed like the others had tried to tidy up for them, and she couldn't help but appreciate them for it.

It saved her from even more work. And with the state that they were in, they were relieved that she could focus on resting.

Plopping on the sofa, Teardrop let out a soft huff. Sunlight poured from the open window, the blinds gently swaying from the breeze that entered through the cracked sill. The nausea twisted her stomach, sending waves of caving agony through her body, causing them to wince as they tried to focus on their breathing.

Alright, they thought to themselves. Don't panic. Just breathe. In, and out.

Don't focus on puking. Breathe.

Breathe.

They looked around. She could see the picture frames that held the precious memories of the past. Photos of her and her old team from BFDI shared an innocence that lingered in the dead atmosphere, a teasing reminder that those simple days were far beyond her reach.

It never really bothered the water droplet. But after everything, she couldn't help but feel a burning anger in the core of her chest.

Or was it nausea.

Oh no.

Deep breaths. Again, in, and out. Can't get too worked up. Can't get sick again.

Her eyes roamed once more. Immediately, they were hooked onto a blue scrapbook that was placed neatly on the table before her, with a pile of photos stacked neatly beside them. It was almost enough to make the nausea dissipate, as she realized that it was the scrapbook that she had made with Ruby's help.

With shaking hands, she reached over, carefully picking up the book as if it were made of pure glass. They remembered that this was made in one of the lowest points of her life- it was made after Needle was killed, after all- but it was filled with the memories of her and Needle, and it served as a gem to her, a token that reminded her of the hope that life could give.

They may be in their lowest of lows right now, but it only means that it's all up from here. And this was a reminder of that.

Carefully, Teardrop would open the book, quietly flipping through the crafted pages. Pictures of her smiling self greeted her, taking her through memory lane as every photo shared a distinctive memory of the past.

Their first challenge. The Squashy Grapes. The awkward smiles and estranged poses in between fights and competitions. Needle's beautiful face was among every page she had. It filled Teardrop's heart with ease, knowing that she was back. Her old friends danced among these collages, and the more she flipped the pages, the more ease she found herself in.

At least, until she found a small bookmark in the center of it all. Curious, she traced her finger along the pages, gently opening it to where it led her to.

TEAM W.O.A.H. BUNCH, EPISODE 3

"Knock knooock!!" Saw chimed, happily knocking at the door before her. She had left the basket beside Gaty, having taken out the pastries that she was going to give to the water droplet. The two had gotten to know Teardrop when she first arrived in the TLC, but as time passed, she became a simple acquaintance, and nothing more.

They were surprised when she was chosen to escape the metal box- but ever since then, they were unaware of what happened to her.

As the seconds ticked by without any answer, Gaty would frown, turning back towards her lover as she continued to endlessly knock on the door. "Saw- maybe they aren't home." She interjected.

Saw pouted. "Gaty- their blinds are up! They're totally home right now!"

"I dunno, maybe they want to be left alone at the moment..? You know we shouldn't push them too hard, here..."

"I know Gaty, but- I don't want these goodies to go to waste! I can't just leave it here on the doorstep, I want to make sure that I'm able to hand it over to them!"

"Well-"

As if on cue, the sound of the unlocking door clicked through the air. It took a moment, but the two objects turned as they watched the door carefully creak open, revealing the disgruntled eyes of the blue object.

There was an indignant heaviness to Teardrop's soul- enough for it to radiate back to the two before her. It sent a shiver down their spines, and to Gaty, it made the hesitancy spike through her veins once more.

Should they even be here..? She didn't want to break Saw's heart by saying no- she meant no harm after all- but, this was something that was too complicated for them to handle. But here she was, watching as Saw's eyes would brighten with joy at the sight of their friend.

"TEARDROP!" She exclaimed, happily holding the bag of muffins close to herself. "Oh, we were worried you wouldn't be home!"

'What do you want?' Teardrop would sign, carefully holding the book underneath her arm. Gaty and Saw would blink; neither one of them understood what she tried to say. But with a nudge from Gaty, Saw would shake her head.

"We just wanted to come by and give you some treats!" She smiled. "We're both really sorry to hear about everything that happened back there."

Gaty nervously added on. "We can't imagine how it must be affecting you right now."

"Yes! So, we decided to make some sweets for you all! I know it isn't much- but we just want to remind you that you guys aren't alone.

We're all here for you, in any way that we can be- please don't be shy to ask us for anything! But, for now.." Saw would grin, happily holding the bag of blueberry muffins towards the water droplet.

"We figured that we'd bring some treats for you! Well- you and Needle... since you all haven't been feeling well!"

Treats.

Teardrop looked down at the bag of muffins, and her pupils shrunk.

Treats, for you.

Her heart dropped. And Pin's voice struck through her mind, like the arrow of a damned archer.

"I figured I'd bring some treats for you... since you haven't been feeling well."

Her blood froze with fear. But her heart immediately began to boil with rage, fires of fury ripping through her soul, and tainting her aching mind.

Without thinking, Teardrop stomped out, giving the object a hard slap across the face. The stinging sound of the impact ripped through the air.

Gasping, Gaty stepped back, before she immediately rushed towards her lover. Saw stumbled back, the muffins falling out of her hold as she held her burning cheek, a faint hand mark slowly beginning to form on it.

"W-What the HELL!" She shouted, turning back towards the water droplet. "WHAT WAS THAT FOR?!"

Teardrop scowled. Flipping the two off, she kicked the muffins away, stepping back and slamming the door with all of her might. It was enough to make the house shake, and a picture frame that hung near the entrance immediately fell from its spot, shattering as it collided with the ground.

It was enough to alert Needle, who rushed over in alarm. Seeing her

girlfriend kneeling on the ground, her body twitching with the agonizing emotions that crashed through her soul, was enough to send her rushing to her side. "TD?!"

Nothing. Teardrop's hands shook, as her eyes locked onto the gnarly scars on her wrists, the bile creeping up the back of her throat.

No- come on, ground yourself. GROUND YOURSELF.

BREATHE, JUST BREATHE!

The frantic reminders that she made to herself had no effect, sinking into the void of despair that corrupted her aching mind. She quickly slammed the book down, and, almost as if fate were giving her a slap in return, the book whipped open to the page where she had left off.

'I should have appreciated you more.

'You were so bright, so sweet, so... amazing. You were like a shining star to me; you've made me see that there really is a good side out of a crappy show with... some crappy people.

'I don't think there's ever gonna be a day where I don't miss your laughs, your voice, and just... you.'

Her eyes washed against the sight of her handwriting. It was enough to ground her, to help them hear the faint sound of Needle's worried voice in the background.

But as she continued, her eyes fell upon the uncanny writing before her. A tone so unrecognizable- that it made her heart drop.

'But, the pain has grown worse. I can't feel much, I can't... do much anymore. You were the reason why I kept trying to go at life.

'But now, you're gone.

'So, is there really a good reason for me to keep fighting?'

Whatever efforts they had made to ground themselves were nothing more than futile.

Her hands carefully brush over the etched words on the page. Their photo- Teardrop's favorite photo- was plastered on a page that contained a lie, crafted by someone that she couldn't believe she trusted. Her eyes scanned through the letter, her trembling growing more as the realization finally crashed upon her.

They were a team. They were friends.

But this note was enough to shatter the hopeful memories that she ever had of the thumbtack.

Hate was too kind of a word to describe how she felt about her.

Needle carefully wrapped her arms round the smaller woman, tears prickling at the corner of her eyes as Teardrop furiously ripped the pages to shreds, the remaining fragments of peace fluttering to the ground around them.

She didn't know how long it could have gone on for. She honestly lost track of it, but with each tear, a new wound would rip open, stinging from the haunted air that they had been reborn into.

I can't believe I am doing this.

You don't understand. This isn't who I am. This was never supposed to be the future I lived in.

Pin is dead. Gone. Gone, for good. We were all promised that when we were recovered, and to this day, they still continue to reassure us that she is never coming back.

At least, until they figure out what they're going to do to her.

Nearly everyone called for some form of revenge. It was usually Ice Cube's line- but she was so distraught by everything, the others took it upon themselves to raise her voice, calling for vengeance on someone who we thought we knew.

That would've been it. We could have moved on, and healed all together; embracing the new world that we now lived in.

Now, it's happening again. All because of me.

'Oh, don't feel so bad dear. The first one is always the hardest~'

"I-I just had to cover our tracks back there. All that blood- what if someone finds it?"

'You shouldn't have to worry about it. After all, I helped you!'

"You told me to dig it up!"

'Well, the rain will wash it all away. We're pretty far from the others- and nobody has made it down this path in a looong while.'

"How do you know that."

'I just do.'

I clenched the steering wheel, quietly pulling onto that damned path. There was no way I could forget this- what she had done is a stain that will taint my mind for the rest of my life. Shifting the joystick, I listened to the engine as its quiet hum filled the air once more, before I twisted the key, the engine shutting off as the silence enveloped the air around me.

We were here.

She knew this too.

'Why did you stop?'

"What do you mean? We're here."

'This is not my garden.'

"It is. You know this path- the others and I do, too."

'No...'

"I'm serious."

My voice was quiet. I was scared that she wouldn't believe me- but I knew she was looking at the charred piece of land. Her eyes were mine, and my eyes were hers; we were back in that garden, the soils where it had all begun.

Yet the plants were gone. There was no more snow, and the barren trees were burnt to a crisp, the ashes of leaves scattered into the soils below. The flowers and bushes, which were once full of life, had turned into fine dust that the flames had engulfed in. What was left of the hands, were a mere char.

She knew that everything had been burnt off. I had told her repeatedly that it had been destroyed. But she hadn't seen it in person yet- so now, it must be her first time taking a better look at the damage that had been done.

I may not have been able to see her. But her rage made my heart fall into the soles of my feet.

What was I supposed to do now..? I didn't want to make her any more angrier than she already was. My life is on the line here.

The silence lasted for a little longer, before she finally spoke.

'I will not fail this garden once more.'

That was my cue to move. Her voice was low- almost, soft- but it carried the weight of a thousand damned souls, clawing and screaming to be released into the world before them. I quickly grabbed the trowel from the seat beside me, before taking a deep breath.

"Anywhere in particular..?" I ask.

'Don't care. The garden should hopefully be enough for him to regenerate. He is a plant after all, yes? I'm sure that his kind have the capability to duplicate himself with a mere branch.~'

Make it quick.

"And if he recovers..?!"

'Tend to him. Clip off any roots or limbs he may regrow- hell, sprinkle some good seeds into those open wounds of his! It will all make wonderful material for my garden... and- oh, poor thing- he won't be able to tell anyone.'

"I... I can hear him- He's still- breathing..! He's supposed to be DEAD!"

'Oh, no no no! He's simply trapped in his own body. What, you'd think I'd

go on and kill again after the funniest recoveries from before? You saw them! I could BARELY contain myself- seeing them mope and whine was HILARIOUS!'

My hands balled into fists. "He is still ALIVE. You didn't do this BEFORE!"

'That's because it was the PAST. With your stupid little recovery center now back and running, I needed to find a way to make this work. That Yoylite has the power to enrich the soul- practically making you immortal... if your physical form can keep up with that.'

"If that's the case, won't he be able to recover?!"

'Please. That recovery center is an entire HIKE from here. His soul is trapped within his body- that huge chunk of stone is keeping his heart pumping! And even if he were freed... he wouldn't be able to travel that far now.'

I couldn't argue with her. None of us would be able to move on from what she did- from the terrifying acts that she made PIN commit.

..Made me, commit.

I have to do it.

Anything for her to leave me alone.

To leave them alone.

Saw quietly rubbed her cheek, sadly clutching the basket close to herself as she sulked through the heavy air of the city. Whatever energy she had was now extinguished- or, well, slapped out of her

system, as she had decided to make her way back home.

The mere sight of her made Gaty's heartache. She knew that there was a risk of trying to help. But seeing her lover get treated so harshly, simply for trying to help, made her feel nothing but malcontent. Even if they had gone through hell and back- it didn't mean they could hurt others too.

With a gentle voice, Gaty would speak to her lover. "Saw..."

"No, Gaty. Let's just go home." The taller woman would clench the handle of the basket. "It's not worth it.."

"Hun', you spent hours making these- don't you want to try and, I dunno- give some to the others..?"

"No."

Gaty flinched, looking to the side in shame. "Look, I'm sorry this didn't go the way you wanted, but... that doesn't mean you should give up, y'know..?"

"I think getting slapped in the face was enough of a sign to stop, Gaty." Saw whispered, her eyes dewey with tears. "We can just- eat the rest anyways."

"I don't think I can try eating loaves of banana bread for the rest of the month." Chuckling quietly, Gaty would step in front of her, stopping her girlfriend from moving forward. This made Saw frown, the hopelessness making her grip loosen on the basket.

"What are you doing..-"

"Saw. I know this must hurt- and, I'm really sorry for how things went back there." Gaty spoke gently, looking up with a gleam in her eyes. "But not only do I know how much work you put into these treats- I know you. You want to help- even with something as small as this, you want to help objects that have been through something unimaginable, to you and me. That compassion drives you and makes you into someone so beautiful, and so, so stubborn- and I can't help but love you more for it."

Tears pricked at the edges of Saw's eyes. As much as she tried to hold it back, a smile was beginning to grow on her face. "Gaty..."

"Maybe baking isn't their thing! Maybe they don't like sweets- but that's ok! What matters is that you keep that drive, that urge you have to help the others with their troubles and pain. And if the others won't appreciate that, then I will."

The basket immediately slipped from Saw's hands. Surprised, Gaty immediately tried to help pick up the baked goods, but was stopped as Saw threw her arms around her, grinning as a blush bloomed on that shining face of hers.

Her heart skipped with joy as she clutched her lover close. Saw couldn't believe how lucky she was to have someone like Gaty by her side. And even with these worries, she knew that she could face any problem head on, ready to emerge on the other side with more wisdom than before.

It was all thanks to Gaty after all. Gosh- the love she had for her was enough to make her explode!

With a soft chuckle, Saw looked down as Gaty's eyes met her. The shimmering, periwinkle hue was enough to lock her into a love-stricken stupor, as she leaned in, letting their lips interlock with one another. They could practically feel their worlds colliding as one, merging together and shimmering as endless flowers bloomed on the path of their future. And they would face it all together, no matter what.

"Well well well, looks like we've run into some lovebirds on the street.."

The sound of Lollipop's voice made the two jump. Startled, Saw whirled to face the taller woman, her face burning red as she crossed her arms.

"W-WARN US, next time?!"

"Nah. It was funny to see how cheesy you both looked." Taco snickered, crossing her arms. "Nice to see you're still just as gay as

ever."

"And look who's talking!"

"HEY!"

The two friends would playfully bicker at one another, yet Lollipop noticed the baked goods scattered around them. With an eyebrow raised, she leaned down, helping Gaty as she was beginning to clean things up.

"Care to explain why you've got a bakery on the go, here?" Lollipop asked.

"It's... a long story. Though- we didn't expect to see you guys here. Taking another stroll through the city?" Organizing the loaves, Gaty would glance up at her.

"Oh, no. We were actually headed to the Town Square- Yoyle's Square, was it? Basketball asked if we could meet in regard to some... emergency."

"Emergency?"

"Guys, please. Let's keep it down."

Basketball's words fell on deaf ears. In fact- no one could hear her, as they were too busy speaking with one another, to try and comprehend what was taking place.

She didn't want to have this escalate into something bigger- it might as well be a simple explanation- yet, she wanted to treat this with as much attention as possible.

After all, she understood that the others wouldn't handle this well. They're still recovering, and she, as well as Robot Flower, took it

upon themselves to care for the newly released citizens of Yoyle City. She made this promise to everyone, including Tennis Ball- as well as his girlfriend- so they could rest as much as they could, especially after the hell they had lived through.

So when Bottle came to her in the late morning, the sports ball could only assume that it was something minuscule. She did tell Basketball that she had a headache, one that wasn't going away- but when she was asked about any potential stressors, it only brought up the mention of her lover.

Tree had promised that he'd return after helping a nearby neighbor last night. But the sun was now high in the sky, and there was no sight of that familiar object in any part of the city.

The last few objects would trickle in, including Gaty and Saw, who carried a basket filled with treats for... whatever reason. Silently clasping at her own hands, Bottle watched as the crowd of familiar faces would slowly begin to quiet down, their eyes soon locking onto the three objects before them.

Well- more like, two. Basketball and Robot Flower took the lead, of course. But Bottle stood quietly on the side; it was help that she needed, after all. Her hands trembled so much, that she had to clench them together to prevent herself from fidgeting any longer. It was over- she was promised it was over- but this wasn't like Tree. How could she express that?

Her thoughts soon silenced, as Basketball cleared her throat.

"We're sorry we had to gather you here," She spoke. "We have a little situation on our hands, and we're gonna need a little help from all of you."

"What kind of situation are you talking about?!" Bell's panicked voice rang through the air. Basketball jumped.

"No no- it isn't anything to be concerned about!"

Nothing to be concerned about. Oh, that sentence made Bottle's fingers twitch. She understood that it was all in good reason- there

would be no use in a massive panic with the others- but she was watering down something that Bottle couldn't brush off so easily. Despite how badly she wanted to object, she held herself back, listening as the sports ball assuaged the others while they voiced their concerns.

"Did someone die?" Pillow tilted her head.

"Wha- no! Nobody died-"

"We just got out of the TLC- don't tell me this is happening again!" Donut crossed his arms.

"It isn't! There's a logical explanation for this!" Robot Flower crossed her arms. "And maybe if you could let Basketball speak, you could find out why!"

"Exactly. It's just something that we need to check up on- and I'm sure that someone here could have a possible answer to the situation that's going on."

"Which is?" The impatience that radiated from Eraser's voice made poor Basketball's eye twitch. She shut her eyes, taking a deep breath in before she turned back towards the others.

"Well, Bottle informed me that Tree hasn't returned home since yesterday night. I was wondering if anyone here knew about his whereabouts?"

"He's MISSING?!" Maker exclaimed, holding his head. "What do you mean he's missing?!"

"He's not missing! He isn't-"

"Isn't this how it started with the others?!" Lightning looked around. "Didn't this all start because someone went missing?!"

"I didn't say he was missing, I said he was-"

"We're gonna DIE HERE-"

"GUYS! ENOUGH!"

A hush fell upon the crowd. Bottle could only stare with a restless panic in her eyes, clutching her hands close to her chest. She squeezed them gently, the same way Tree would squeeze them, silently hoping that this mess would be sorted out.

This wasn't like Tree.

Her Tree wouldn't leave and never come home.

Basketball caught her breath, frustration radiating from her cheeks before she took in a deep breath.

"We aren't saying he's missing." She began, gently walking to the side. "We know what he was up to- we just need to ask if anyone here has seen him."

Robot Flower would soon chime in, raising her mechanical arm towards Bottle. "What was he doing out in the middle of the night yesterday?"

Oh.

Immediately, Bottle would straighten herself out, brushing herself off before she spoke towards the two.

"W-Well, uh.. Tree really wanted to help the recovered cast with their-.. nightmares..? So he told me that he was going to help with Pen, and ever since then.. he hasn't come home."

A lead, Basketball thought. She turned back towards the crowd, her eyes meeting that familiar blue cap from the tallest in the group.

"Pen? Got anything that can help us here?"

No one had really noticed the guy on the journey there. In fact, everyone was preoccupied with themselves, curious as to what was taking place for them to be called over to the square, or, well.. bothered, as to why their day had to be interrupted this way.

But as their eyes turned to him, they were immediately taken aback. How couldn't they be? The guy looked like he had gotten hit by a

truck.

There were dark circles hanging under his eyes, his body leaning against Eraser as he was passed out cold. Every now and then, a snore would break past his lips, despite the gentle nudging from the shorter object below.

"Pen," Eraser murmured, gently taking his hand. "Cmon'- wake up."

Another snore. Instantly, the pink parallelogram rolled his eyes, and smacked him upside the head. "Wake up!"

Wincing, Pen immediately bounced back into his feet, holding the back of his cap with a whine.

"What the hell!" He looked down, his mind still cloudy with the sleepiness that embraced him before. He rubbed the area where Eraser had hit, and the other object frowned, gently holding his hands.

"Pen, they were trying to talk to you." Eraser looked up, gently holding his cheek. "You promised you'd try and stay awake here."

"I'm tired, though.."

"We can go back to bed once this is over. Now help them."

Pen groaned, sleepily standing back up as Eraser kept his arm around him, letting his boyfriend lean against him for support. The two kept their hands interlocked with one another, causing a few of the others to stare in disgust at the display of affection.

This was clearly not the time for this.

And Bottle couldn't help but clutch her own hands tighter once more.

Basketball rolled her eyes, turning towards Robot Flower and giving her partner a nod.

The metal blossom then took over. "What was Tree helping you with?"

"Tree?" Pen looked up, his eyes struggling to keep themselves open. "Oh- right, Tree... I needed help calming Pencil down, and I remember hearing him talk about 'wanting to help the others' and all that.. figured it wouldn't hurt to ask him for help, since I've been trying to help for the past two weeks now.. and.."

Everyone watched as Pen's eyes slowly succumbed to the heaviness that weighed him down, his body slowly leaning against Eraser once more. It wasn't until the sound of another snore broke through his mouth, and in that moment, the others had enough.

"**PEN**!"

"WAAH-" Pen yelped, jumping out of Eraser's arms once more. "I'M AWAKE, I'M AWAKE!"

"Then tell us- where did Tree go AFTER he helped you?!" Frustrated, Basketball approached the writing utensil, tired of having to deal with the situation already. She began to question how Tennis Ball (and especially Golf Ball), could've POSSIBLY handled them in the past.

But Pen shook his head. "W-Well! We actually got to talk afterwards- it wasn't long, just enough for him to drop me off at Eraser's place. I remember him saying that he wanted to take a stroll through the city..? No idea why."

"That's because he needs fresh air.." Bottle's voice struck through the crowd, as she made her way to Robot Flower's side.

"Fresh air- at night?"

"Tree was cooped up in the TLC for so long- he was lacking the fresh air and sunlight he needed. He IS a tree, after all.." She explained, looking down at her hands. She let her thumb caress the back of them, gently brushing against the area where Tree had kissed them previously.

"...I know he'd want to get some moonlight- it is nice and all, but... he wouldn't vanish like this. I know my Tree- and he wouldn't ever try something like this."

The tears that filled the back of her eyes were enough to make her step back. Bottle squeezed her hands back together, lowering her head as she was trying to make sense of the situation, even with everything they had learned so far.

She knew Tree would help them all- she admired him for it. And she had no problem with him getting the fresh air that he had needed for quite some time now.

Yet, for him to vanish like this... it twisted knots in the pit of Bottle's stomach.

"...Well, if that's all you guys need, then... Can I go?" Pen interjected.

Sighing, Robot Flower looked back towards the two. "No. Please try and stay awake Pen. This is serious."

"I know! I know! Listen, I-.. I had to deal with Pencil for two weeks now! And not just her- the entirety of Freesmart, too! NONE of them are mentally sound right now." Pen chuckled anxiously. "It's like a box of chocolates- but instead of different flavors, you get different reasons to their trauma! Choco-covered trauma!"

"...You know what- go back to sleep, Pen."

"He's right about ONE thing." The sudden voice made the crowd look around in confusion. They had all accounted for each other being able to make it to the town square, yet the origin of the voice quickly made them doubt that.

Fanny. Bracelety, too- she was staggering after her, quietly rubbing the back of her head. The two of them pathetically made their way into the crowd, not caring that they were late to the conversation at hand.

And Basketball wasn't shy to note it at all. "Fanny, Bracelety- there you are! I was beginning to get worried-"

"Well don't! I already HATE being late here!" Fanny snapped, glaring back up at the orange sports ball. "But we had to try and deal with some other things first!"

Donut couldn't help but notice the exhaustion that was painted all over their faces- especially Bracelety's. "Jeez- is everything okay? You two look-"

"Dead." Pillow blinked, carefully observing the two. "Are you sure you aren't walking zombies here?"

Fanny could only growl as the object blocked her path. "I HATE zombies!"

"Pillow, please. Both of you- what happened back there?!" Basketball walked towards the two, clear concern on her face. This alone made Fanny want to snap- she almost considered kicking her out of the way- yet Bracelety quickly intervened, holding her hands out nervously.

"WE WEREN'T LATE ON PURPOSE! I-IT TOOK ME SO LONG TO GET ICE CUBE TO SLEEP- SHE COULDN'T STOP SCREAMING!" The blue bracelet would glance towards Fanny, worriedly rubbing the back of her own head. "IT WAS ALSO THE SAME WITH BUBBLE..."

"She couldn't sleep. Even if she did- the nightmares woke her up. But- whatever. What's going on here?"

Quiet. Everyone looked towards one another, waiting to see who would answer the electrical fan's question. But, it didn't take long for Bottle to do so for them.

"Tree is missing," She said. "And- well, we're trying to figure out where he is- or what he was up to."

"Tree? I hate Tree!" Shouting, Fanny would kick at the ground, stomping on a small weed that snaked through a crevice on the ground. Even with the sudden spike of anger, Bottle immediately found herself thinking back to Pen's words, knowing that her lover had wanted to help their team through the nightmares.

"Fanny, Bracelety," She began, holding her hands close to herself. "Pen said that Tree was helping the Freesmarters yesterday night. Did you see him?"

"I heard him." Fanny replied, stifling a yawn. "He was helping-.. who

was it that was screaming about her head again..."

"PENCIL!" Bracelety exclaimed.

"Pencil. He was helping Pencil."

Bottle nodded, quickly diving into the questions that ate away at her mind. "Did you see him leave? Did he mention anything about leaving? Did he sound upset? Stressed? Angry??"

Nervously, the woman's words began to grow faster and faster, she almost found herself stumbling over a few. This earned a few strange looks from the crowd- especially from Fanny and Bracelety- but the two would look towards one another, and pout.

"We didn't really see him. We were focused on helping our girlf- uh... Bubble and Ice Cube, with their night terrors."

"Was there anything that you could hear?"

"Besides the screaming? As much as I hated it- he surprisingly got Pencil and Match to stop. I think I heard him saying something about "getting some fresh air" from the whole thing. I wouldn't blame him."

No lead. The headache that made Bottle's mind split began to seep its way back, leaving her to rub her forehead tiredly. She was growing frustrated with the lack of information that everyone was giving her, and despite how badly she wished for the others to lend her some sort of hand, she figured it was time to take things into her own.

"Then I guess I'll have to look for him myself." Bottle murmured, quietly looking down at her own hands. She could still feel the way his lips pressed against them- the kiss being a reminder of how much she had cherished him— and she clenched them into fists, turning away.

She'd find him. One way or another.

And she wasn't going to let anything stop her, no matter what.

The crowd murmured with sympathy, exchanging passive glances towards one another as they watched Bottle step away from

everyone. They knew how close Bottle and Tree had become during their time in the TLC- even beforehand. The relationship made Bottle's smile more lighter than usual, her happiness keeping the others from raging in the damned prison. Without him- especially without him- that usual smile of hers was hidden underneath an endless dread, a worry that would haunt her for the rest of her time.

Even with this, they knew they shouldn't feel worried. The recovery centers were back, after all! And even if Tree had gotten-.. hurt... there would always be a way to get him back.

As the others watched Bottle, Barfbag couldn't help but feel a twinge of worry towards Bracelety; usually the girl was bouncing in her spot, her excitement leading to her waving her hands excitedly or rambling to the disgruntled fan beside her.

Now, she stood silently, her eyes gazing into dead air from sheer exhaustion. She stepped towards her.

"Did they even sleep at all..?" She asked softly. Bracelety looked up, shaking her head with a sigh.

"WE TRIED TO HELP THEM," she began, "BUT ICY- SHE WAS TELLING ME THAT HER BODY WAS HURTING. I TRIED GIVING HER BLANKETS- BUT SHE FREAKED OUT, SAYING THAT THEY HURT!"

"And Bubble?"

Fanny shook her head. "Every time she fell asleep, she would sleepwalk! She would scream, punching at the air and screaming at the top of her lungs! I.." Her face scrunched up with anger, as she glared up at the crowd.

"I HATE THAT STUPID THUMBTACK! I HATE HER! SHE'S BROKEN EVERYONE BEYOND REPAIR- AND NOW WE HAVE TO WATCH THEM WITHOUT ANY WAY OF HELPING THEM!"

"We know." Snowball's murmur was enough to earn a glare from the smaller object. But before she could even try and snap at him, she was suddenly interrupted as a small bundle of grass hopped through

the crowd, excitedly making his way towards-

"Basketball!!" Grassy smiled, laughing as he happily skipped in circles around her. "Grassy couldn't find you!! But Grassy found you! Grassy found Basketball!"

Scowling, Fanny stomped her foot. "I HATE BEING INTERRUPTED!"

"Grassy likes interrupting!"

"Grassy..." Basketball sighed, carefully kneeling down as the green object excitedly waved his hands towards her. She tried to keep herself serious, but seeing how thrilled he looked to see her once more, she couldn't help but smile, just a little bit. She let the little one climb onto the top of her head, before she made her way back to the crowd.

Everyone was now talking amongst themselves once more. Worry? There couldn't be worry- it was all OVER. They beat Pin, and they were finally able to live normally!

The recovery centers were back. There couldn't be anything that disturbed the peace that they would now rebuild.

They all had promised that. Basketball promised that- especially to those who had recovered once more.

Yet, with this, there was still something that itched at the back of their minds.

"How are we supposed to break this to the others?" Bell asked, lowering herself towards the others. "Are we going to try and tell them about this?"

Basketball opened her mouth to respond, but Fanny immediately stomped her way, shaking her head. "Are you insane?! They'll start screaming during the day too- I'm already losing sleep here!"

"But they deserve to know what's going on too! They were here before us!" Clock exclaimed.

"They're going to lose their MINDS! We keep this from them, and

that's it!" Liy argued.

Chaos. The others immediately tried to speak over one another, debating whether they should bring up their missing neighbor, or keep it all at bay. It was a valid point of concern, yet it didn't seem that the others knew him too well to even notice. After all- they were all safe in that metal chamber of theirs. Everyone else?

They didn't have the time to explore who was there. Any curiosities they had were cut short, all thanks to the damned thumbtack and her feared trowel.

With the arguments getting louder, Grassy immediately covered his ears, scrunching his face in displease. The noise was beginning to get to him, and with Robot Flower catching a glimpse of this, she immediately intervened.

"THAT'S ENOUGH!"

A hush fell once more. The arguments came to a freeze- and all eyes were locked onto the new scientific duo, including their bundle of grass. Basketball couldn't help but stare at the robot in awe, her eyes beginning to twinkle at the mere power this woman had over the crowd. When she wasn't able to get them together, Robot Flower was there. But, when structure and plans were needed to guide them all, Basketball was on the case.

They were a duo! At least, in Basketball's mind...

Even if she was... really, really pretty...

"Basketball?"

Crap.

The sports ball shook her head, immediately hiding her blushing face as she cleared her throat.

"Let's... not, open up about this to everyone else." Sighing, Basketball glanced back towards the entrance of a familiar laboratory, thinking back to the state of the two other scientists in the city. The other objects couldn't help but stare curiously, with Balloony hesitantly

raising his hand.

"Why not?"

"Believe me. It's better this way. We're still waking up to the sounds of their screams here. If anything- we can't make this worse."

⚠

'Keep cutting, now!~'

'Let's get those hands back where they belong!~'

I grit my teeth at the sounds around me. The rest of the process is nothing short of a blur, I have to admit it. I couldn't focus- I tried my hardest to let my mind drift beyond this damned garden. But the smell of roadkill was enough to snap me back in mere seconds.

I clenched the trowel, sawing it back and forth at Tree's twitching arm. Fresh blood splurged from the broken skin, oozing into the soil as I could hear the squish and rips from his flesh. While I cut, I can hear each vein being ripped apart, bits of flesh succumbing to the sharpened end of the garden tool. I couldn't help but look up, and that's when I could see Tree's eye, staring back at me.

He had managed to try and shift his head to the side. It was a pathetic attempt, of course, as it was the only untouched part of that charming face of his. Yet, that singular eye exchanged the screams of agony that were coming from his soul. There was a soft clink- and when Tree's body suddenly jerked to the side, I realized that I had gotten to the bone.

"H-..How, am I supposed to-"

'Cut through.'

"What-"

'Cut through the bone now, dear. Don't be shy.'

My stomach was twisting into knots already, and my heart was about to burst; I wanted to scream, to cry, to run back and warn everybody else about what was taking place.

"But the trowel isn't sharp enough!"

'And? You can make it work.'

I couldn't. I couldn't risk losing them. It's happening again- and she was promised that it wouldn't- but it was happening again, all due to something that was beyond their control.

It was never Pin. It was never herself- would anyone be able to understand that?

Clenching Tree's arm, I dug my nails into his skin, forcefully yanking him towards me. I ignored the pained wheezing from his open trachea, and slammed the trowel back into his wrist, quickly beginning to hack away at the wrist bone. Cracks and crunches echoed around me, drowning out the agonized gargles as I carefully lifted the trowel.

Halfway through. It was halfway through.

Nobody would believe me.

Couldn't time go faster?!

No one would even listen.

UGH!

I stabbed the trowel into the ground. With both hands, I grabbed Tree's partially cut hand, and forcefully snapped it in half, yanking it towards me. A loud crack was quickly drowned by the sudden tear of raw flesh, blood splattering on my face as I pulled it off.

Somehow, I ripped more than I needed. A large chunk of flesh dangled from the disembodied hand, the flesh once belonging to Tree's upper arm. From the way I ran him over, his chest was now ripped open, and I stared as his heart continued to beat.

From fear, or from pain- I couldn't tell.

Tree's body twitched, his burst veins still pumping blood as the voice giggled.

'Oh! That yoylite does wonders~ he just keeps bleeding and bleeding! It'll make a wonderful loam for my flowers...~'

I'll never be able to wash it off. It stains me- it is permanent, no matter how hard I try to scrub.

As I quickly move onto his other hand, I winced at the headache that grew harsher with every passing second. It felt as if my brain was being split apart, and I could feel the world around me melt away into a bitter void.

Crunching. Squishing. Cracking, and popping. The sound of my heart was enough to overpower this.

Was the trowel becoming sharper...?

How could it change?!

The blood was being absorbed by the soil. No matter how much time passed, Tree couldn't stop bleeding. I move to his legs- I can't risk him escaping.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't ignore it anymore.

I look up.

...Flowers...?

He was dismembered.

Hydrangeas...

Keep digging.

Gladiolus..

I forced his body in.

Bells of Ireland flowers...

His body slumped onto mine, the crushing sounds of his broken bones causing me to glare. His pupil was frantically darting back and forth, trying to make sense of the situation with the remaining strength he had. I easily made out his trachea, visibly opening and closing as he attempted to make his pain clear to me.

His wheezes were so loud. Too loud.

His eye met mine. I forcefully snapped him up, angrily straightening his body as I finally got him to stay upright.

Every bone and muscle crunched against one another, the jagged edges piercing deeper into his open flesh. I could hear his voice- faintly, but surely- as the snapping of intertwining bones made him grunt wheezily. And it seems like that was enough to rid him of his efforts, as his bloodshot eye was fixed on dead air, quivering from the indescribable pain that seared through his broken body.

The blood stained the ground as he was now planted, trapped with the layers of dirt and char that kept him anchored to the Earth. The blood that I once saw was now being replaced with blooming buds of endless plants, not leaving a singular spot untouched.

This wasn't real. I knew it wasn't.

But why did it feel so... comforting...?

I looked up at Tree. He himself was now a gory tree for the garden, the first addition to a never-ending nightmare, and it appeared that life was being breathed back into that damned plot of land.

I'd like to apologize for how long this is guys. ESPECIALLY ON A MONDAY....

I SWEAR IT WAS GONNA BE OUT EARLIER. But the fanfic authors curse.... yeah I almost fainted in class today and although I tried to make it through, my professor was just "go home" and my ass went home.

Uhhh what else. I'm a lesbian! My roommate kissed me and we are thriving as besties

And also! basketbot real. sawty real. tacopop real. penraser real.

ok enjoy!

-ice

Sense of Belonging

A dead coin walking.

Coiny knew what his fate would be if anyone discovered what had been done.

Rumor had it that the TLC-ers had all gathered in the town square earlier today. He could see it from the window, even as he scribbled unspoken words on a pained letter. He had no idea as to what was taking place- but he knew that if this were to be done, it had to be that night.

The sky was dark. Night had fallen upon the city, and everyone he had come to know was slumbering underneath the comfort of their newly found homes.

Except for him.

His hands had already pressed the pulsating green button- there was no going back.

And what if she hadn't changed?

No. None of that now.

He needed one look. A moment.

There was no way to make the world stop, to freeze time so he could see what had happened to the woman he had come to love. But with the sun in its usual slumber, and with the world at bay, he knew that it would be now, or never.

The familiar ding of the recovery center fills Coiny's 'ears', and he hears the familiar thump of an object falling onto the ground. Did he fathom the severity of the situation- how crucial it was going to be to

act normally, as if these mere moments were nothing but a distant thought? He must. He clenched his fists.

Everyone was asleep by now. The night air pricked against his copper surface, the moon now poised over the night sky as the stars twinkled ever so slightly amidst the gaping void of space. The lights within the laboratory were off, the usual hum of distant machinery now silenced as the two scientists had left for the night. It was just him. No one else.

Yet, if that were the case, why did it feel like the ghosts of the past were watching, burning damned holes into the tragic sinner before them?

His face began to burn. It was not pain- not particularly- but a hushed stinging that continued. Perhaps it was blush- or the rising anger that he had carried for an endless amount of time. He carefully brushed his hand against his cheek, failing to notice the tears that began to make their way down his face.

For the first time in these damned five weeks, he could feel the tension in his heart melting away at the sight of someone he had fallen for, seemingly ages ago. His hands trembled violently, twitching with the urge to reach towards the figure before him.

Pin.

Act.

In one moment, the light had vanished.

Act.

In another, the Earth itself melted, and everything that surrounded her dried up to mere ash.

Act, act. act.

Her flesh had boiled, wounds ripping open like roasted vegetables, and any sound that attempted to escape from her mouth was scorched to dust.

ACT. ACT. ACT. ACT.

This pain. Something she had never imagined before.

ACT.

Blazing agony seared through her mind, the fires consuming every fragment of her being.

ACT.

She was not alone.

ACT.

She was never alone.

ACT.

That voice had ruined her. Tainted her. Stained her with the blood of the objects she had come to love, oh so dearly.

ACT.

Hell. She was trapped. Forever.

ACT.

She fell to the ground.

ACT. ACT. ACT.

And no matter how hard she tried.

ACT.

The echo of that voice remained.

ACT.

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"Pin?"

There was no beauty that could compare to the striking crimson hue of Pin's eyes.

Watching as they flickered open, a small glimmer illuminating the familiarity that brought a sense of ease to Coiny's heart. He nearly forgot the feeling itself, as he was used to swooning from every moment where his beloved had turned to look at him.

The thumbtack did not move. At least, when she heard his voice. She had been rocking back and forth, her nails digging into her head as her panicked breathing had snaked through the heavy air of the slumbering lab. There was an endless terror that looped around her mind, constricting it like a snake towards its prey. She was panicking; Coiny didn't want to make things worse by trying to get near her.

Thankfully, the sound of his voice was enough to bring her back.

He had silently wished for the courage to approach her. Seeing the scar that engraved itself over one of her eyes, and the marks that had made themselves present on her 'neck', were enough to make his heart drop to the soles of his feet.

Every second felt like an eternity, and the two would continue to stare at each other without a single word. Pin could feel her spirit being grounded to the present, guided by the familiar charm of those copper eyes of his, but with her mind now settling into the slumbering atmosphere of Yoyle City, she realized what had just taken place.

It was done. The future was set. Nothing could take them back.

And this alone made Pin's arms quiver.

Was there a need to reminisce on everything that had happened? The damage she had inflicted, the pain she had caused, the sensation of her true self slipping away into the grasps of...

Coiny watched as her shivering ensued once more, and noticing her hesitation, he spoke. "You're back..."

Was it Pin's imagination, or did Coiny's spirit brighten a little as he said those words? The damned silence ensued.

"I'm... We're alive?" Pin's body tensed up at the sound of her own voice. When was the last time she could recognize the words that slipped past her mouth?

Looking around, Coiny gave her a hesitant nod. "We're back. All of us."

He stepped towards her, the faint breeze from his movements slicing against her skin like switchblades. His pose was enough to make her cower, reminding her of where they had once left off. But her body continued to ache, and she knew that she couldn't stay tethered to the ground.

Inch by careful inch, Pin would draw herself back onto her feet. She couldn't help but feel angered at how scared she was- the bed had been made, and now she had to lie in it- but the thought of seeing the faces she had killed once more was like a burning meteorite in her throat.

Pin knew what awaited her- there was no doubting it- as every final moment of her former friends continued to loop in her mind like a broken record. Although she had come to accept the fury that he carried, Pin couldn't help but wish for Coiny to speak soft words of comfort. Yet, it couldn't be called a hope- as it was nothing more than a daydream, easing her and preparing her for the consequences of her actions.

Her actions...

It was never her.

Was it..?

Waves of pain ran hot and cold, hot and cold, over and over again within her body. Pin shook her head, letting her eyes gaze down upon her own hands.

No matter how hard she tried, she could still see the blood.

She was terrified of moving. Terrified of touching her own face, terrified of reaching towards her boyfriend, the angel that had once guided her through it all. Her body hadn't been her own in so long;

she accepted the fact that she was a mere puppet to the voice that overtook her.

Was this really her?

If she felt his hand- would she break again?

Would this be it?

Death, is it her ultimate solace?

Everything changed.

And it was all because of her.

"Pin..."

Coiny's voice. The gentle lull in a simple name.

Pin looked up. There he was- mere footsteps away from her. The last time she had seen him, her trowel had pierced through his heart, the life in his eyes draining with the blood from his body. Now, he looks clean and healthy, the scar on his chest serving as a pitiful reminder of their final moment together. He looked beautiful, Pin had to carefully rub her eyes to help her mind recognize him.

Yet, the corners of his mouth lifted into a smile. A smile so familiar, Pin could instantly recognize it, from the moment they had first met, to the moment they had shared their first kiss. When she sees this, he immediately flung his arms around the taller object, clutching her close to himself. Pin staggered back in shock, nearly losing her balance before she realized what he had done.

A hug. So simple, and silent. Yet, it carried the unspoken grievances that they had wished to exchange before it all.

She rights herself, and there the two stayed, clinging onto one another as Coiny's sobs began to echo in the quiet room. He nuzzles her cheek, taking in her warmth, yet she was stiff.

Don't you know? The thoughts pierced through her mind. Don't you know the danger you're in now? Don't you understand how angry

they will be if they see you like this?

Act- no, I can't act. No. She's gone- she's GONE, she's not HERE-

Act. You have to act.

No.

This is my brain-

It was hers.

Always hers.

It's mine-

Her mark is here forever.

No, its over, it has to be-

Forever will be hers.

Coiny's eyes opened, confused as Pin slowly pried herself off of him. His heart pounded against his chest, carefully trying to reach for the warmth of her hold, yet her clouded gaze was enough to make him freeze.

"What are you doing?" she murmurs.

"I had to bring you back. I needed to," Coiny says.

"What?" Pin questioned.

"I recovered you," he insists.

Her eyes began to fill with tears. "Why did you?"

"I couldn't leave you behind like that," Coiny said, tearfully. "I needed to bring you back- everyone got a chance to recover. That should go

for you, too."

"Why me?" Her breaking voice was enough to crush Coiny's stomach from the sheer weight of his repressed emotions, such as sadness, anger, and fear. Longing, too. He couldn't hide that anymore- yet, it held too much of a competition to ever stand a winning chance.

Coiny watched as Pin wrapped her arms around herself, unused to the sensation of being alive. Time had merged into a boiling pot of reminiscence, as she was trapped with the constant memories of ending lives. She looked morose and pale, so different from the confident team captain that he had fallen in love with.

She was a complete opposite to the memory he had clung onto for months on end.

Tentatively, Coiny stepped towards her. "I want to help you."

"Help?"

"Yes."

"What about everyone else?" She asked. "Do you think they want to help me, too?"

The sharpness in her tone made Coiny dig his nails into his palm. Swallowing the sob that boiled in his throat, he looked up. "It doesn't matter."

"To you, maybe."

For a moment, his eyes held onto Pin's distressed pupils as her reply made his muscles freeze. But in the screen of the recovery center, he caught his own reflection staring back at him, his mouth open in dismay as he could feel himself slipping away.

Why was he scared? Pin was still there- arrogant, mean-spirited Pin, at least. He recognized that hostility anywhere, especially from the time they had spent together in the games. His mouth shuts, as he silently prayed that this could conceal the sudden anger that bubbled inside of him.

"You know- maybe you're right. I mean, how selfish could I be for bringing you back?" says Coiny, a twinge of pain in his voice. "I'm so sorry, Pin. I'm sorry that I cared too much."

"Coiny, can't you see what you've done?!" Pin shouted at him.

The copper coin shook his head, his anger radiating from his voice. "I can. And that decision is standing in front of me."

"You're a fool. Do you think they're going to be RELIEVED to see me?!"

"I am. Is that not enough?"

"Don't lie to me! It's all just-"

Lies.

No, god no.

Pin clutched her head tightly, and seeing the sudden reaction from her made a twinge of worry pluck at Coiny's heartstrings. Carefully, he would reach towards her, trying to help her ground herself once more. But his efforts were futile, as she quickly stepped away from his reach, pressing herself against the wall of the recovery center.

"Why? Why did you bring me back?!" She croaked out, now unable to stop the fear that broke through the cracks of her voice. "Don't you know what's going to happen now?!"

"Everyone was recovered Pin. EVERYONE. That should have included you- and now you're getting mad at ME?!" He snaps.

"I DIDN'T DESERVE TO BE RECOVERED! You, out of ALL PEOPLE, should have KNOWN THAT!"

"Trust me- I DO." Coiny lashed back, feeling his face kindling, heating up from mere frustration. "Me recovering you isn't a sign of my forgiveness. But that doesn't mean I should sit back and forget EVERYTHING we had together!"

"If that was true, you would have known that staying dead was

BETTER!"

"And leaving you behind from living once more wasn't?!"

"Coiny! If the others find out about this- we're done for- I'M done for!" The collectiveness that Pin clung to collapsed like a pile of bricks, causing her to nosedive into the crater of panic. "I- what I did, to EVERYONE- wh-what she made me DO-"

Coiny's eyes widened, quickly cutting her off. "She?! Who's she?!"

"Can't you just LISTEN TO ME for ONCE?!"

"You're telling ME to listen?! Do you hear yourself right now?!"

Arguments. The two could feel their voices rising like a ship in the midst of a storm, trying to keep their voices low to prevent their sounds falling upon the wrong ears. But the more their words unveiled themselves, the more they began to slip, irritability and exasperation blinding their rationality.

"I don't know why you're being so stubborn, Pin!" Coiny gritted through his teeth. "Since when did you ever care about THE OTHERS here?!"

Taken aback, Pin could feel her heart being ripped in half. "Excuse me?!"

"It's true, isn't it?! I saw what you've done- YOU know what you did- not caring about ANYONE here besides that mint-forsaken garden. You killed EVERYONE we knew, including your best friends. So why are you still trying to pretend, when we KNOW who you really are?!"

"...Pretend?" The gentle yet weakened sound of Pin's voice was enough to wash Coiny's mind with a wave of realization. Looking up, his heart sunk into the void of his chest as he noticed the crystalline tears that slipped down her cheeks.

Now he's done it! Digging a deeper hole into the grounds of regret. If she had even a ghost of luck, Pin would brush it off, reducing his words to a mere outburst. But the expression in her eyes was enough to say otherwise, squeezing every last breath out of Coiny's throat.

What will she do to him now? Take him away? Turn him in? Take the first swing before the destined torture that lays before her? For Goiky's sake- what was he THINKING?

Pin's gaze fell to the ground. Great- did it even matter now? It wasn't like he was going to save her- nor forgive her- at all. She knew how everyone would react; locking her up and finding a way to inflict all their pain onto her. Who cares what they would do to her? She lost control. That voice overtook her spirit, and it was her who clenched the trowel. Death was out of the option- killing her wouldn't be enough. Would they kill Coiny? Punish him too? Why? What did they care?

Taking a deep breath, Pin turned her head away. "I'm going to be the one facing the consequences- the one who suffers and pays the price of everything that happened."

"Pin.." Coiny whispered. The thumbtack clutched her arms tightly, sniffling ever so silently as she continued to speak.

"Yes, everyone else was killed. But I was not. Bubble was the one who put an end to everything I had done- everything she had done. This was a terrible idea Coiny, I killed everyone in Yoyle City. Our friends. Even Fries..." she shut her eyes, quickly composing herself. "At the end of the day, I'm a monster. Even if I try to explain what she did- it was still me who did it."

"What she did.." Confusion ate away at Coiny's mind, unsure at what she was trying to say. Was there something that influenced it all? Something nobody knew about? "Pin-"

"I know you were trying to be nice, but... at the end of the day, I'm still dead. Dead to everyone around me- and, physically dead, when they find me. Did you want this? Did you bring me back just to see me suffer like this?"

The amount of pain that Coiny was in could never be described. He thought that this would have helped. He dreamt that it would help him find some sort of ease in the sea of grief that he was downing in. But hearing Pin's words made him step forward, latching onto Pin's shivering arms.

His mere touch comforted her, as the shivering began to die down. Yet the words circled in Coiny's brain, and he couldn't help but ask.

"Did our relationship mean nothing to you, Pin..? Do you really think I'd let that happen to you?!"

Pin's hands gripped tighter at her own sides. Even as Coiny's hands cupped over hers, she couldn't hold back the sob that swelled in the center of her throat, her body twitching as her regret spilled out in front of him.

How could she forget? She remembered how much of a sweetheart he was- swooning and praising her as the two went about in their daily lives. His charm was unmatched, making his love towards her clear with every passing day.

Despite everything he had to experience- everything he had seen- he risked it all, just to bring her back.

Choking on a sob, Pin would weakly reply to the coin-creature, who carefully held her steady.

"...No, I-... I know you wouldn't.." She whispered, the fear now returning to her. She struggled to keep her mind together- and soon it became clear that she was struggling to keep her anxiety from turning into nausea as she let her arms loosen in Coiny's hold.

His quiet words of comfort tuned out from Pin's mind, her nerves morphing into dread and terror as she began to anticipate the break of dawn. The moment the sun rises, everyone rises- if any eyes dared to spot her here, she would be dead. Gone. Not able to escape the hands of fate once more. Her fingers find comfort in tracing over Coiny's hand, reminding her to try and understand what he had going on in that mind of his. But he notices this, frowning.

"..We still have time," He whispers. "We can-.. talk.. you can tell me what you-"

A shake of her head, and his words come to a stop. There was nothing more that they could do now. Coiny's love clashed against his anger and confusion at everything she had done, yet Pin was

struggling to decide whether to throw in the towel, or defend what she had been forced to do.

Carrying the weight of what has been done, the two were scornful. Nothing could forgive the harm that was carried out, no matter how they felt towards one another. He would make that clear for the rest of his damned life, if he must. But their hearts had become intertwined, their flames flickering and dancing amongst one another with the ghosts of their former selves. What they had built and nourished together was too much to let go.

But it was too soon.

And while one of them could see it... the other desperately tried to look away.

"Pin." The sound of Coiny's voice made those enchanting eyes of hers meet his own. He carefully lowered her arms, leaning closer towards the sound of her voice as their faces were mere inches away from one another.

Those crimson eyes- how it grounded him to reality. But, he looked down.

"..You know you can't be here."

Pin flinched, hesitating to pull away. "...I know."

Quiet. Hushed melodies of the night kept the aching silence at bay, the two standing with their hands interlocked within one another. Every second that passed clicked a piece into the puzzle of the future, laying down a path that both would have to eventually face, separately.

And the words that slipped free from Coiny's lips fell hard into his soul. He didn't want this- mint knows he never wanted it to be this way- but there was his anger, his frustration still seething in the center of his chest. He didn't want that to affect her.

But he didn't want to let go.

"We need space." Pin whispered, carefully loosening the grip on his

hand as she pulled away. "I have to hide from the others."

"No.." Coiny couldn't stop the word as it came out in a mere whisper.

"You said it yourself. It's... I can't be seen here. I can't."

"Pin, please- a-at least let me help you. Let me find a way to get you out safely, I-" Tears flooded his vision, his voice growing more foreign as grief overtook him. "I don't want you to-"

"Coiny, we have to do this."

"It's killing me to let you go..!"

"We both don't want to do this, I know that now. Please believe me when I say that." Pin wiped her eyes, taking tiny steps away from the coin. "But you have to understand that we need this."

"I..." Letting the tears fall, Coiny looked down at his hands. They shook with unease, the pain of this unwinding future poisoning him with many unfortunate realizations; one of them being about letting her go.

But those scars served as a reminder. Pin knew it as much as he did. Every time her eyes fell upon them, a wave of guilt would crash against her, dragging her below the ocean of shame that she waded through. She loved him- loved him beyond death itself- but she knew that she didn't deserve him.

She loved him. But she never deserved someone like him. And the thought alone made her heart lurch with agony, as she realized now that her next steps would be the start of a grueling journey of survival.

With the sky now beginning to glow into a faint yellow, they knew that their time together was dwindling. The conversations that they wished to exchange with one another were now forced back into the shelves of their thoughts, yet the look in their eyes made it clear that neither of them were prepared for what came next.

It was this, or Pin's eternal torment. Coiny had hoped to force a third option in its way, but reality crushed him back into the pit of reality.

And boy, did it hurt.

He couldn't stop the tears as they poured like a kitchen faucet. He stared at the woman before him, the faint memory of the Pin he had envisioned slowly fading away into the night sky.

She had to go.

She wasn't safe here.

Oh, how he wished he could at least stay with her.

It became too much for Pin. She pulled her hands away, holding her head as her eyes would come to a painful close. She drowned in sorrow, forever damning that voice for controlling her to do the unthinkable, for destroying the good that had come out of this game.

Would they meet again..?

At least, keep them in each other's thoughts. Would that be enough? Was it too much to ask for?

The quiet sounds of daybreak were beginning to pour into the lab. The sky grew lighter, as the two solemnly made their way up the stairs, staring at the horizon before them. The sun was moments shy of finally breaking through, and they had to make a move.

Out of the corner of Pin's eye, she watched as Coiny extended his hand, that damned scar looped around his wrist like a cursed bracelet. She glanced towards him, uncertainty tainting her aching soul.

"One more- before you go..?" He asks. His voice wasn't angry. Nor was it hopeful. It's hollow, and it crushed her heart. In the blink of an eye, her partner in crime- her right hand man- was slipping through her hold.

She took his hand, squeezing it gently, taking in the softness of his palms as he carefully leaned up, placing a gentle kiss on her cheek. Her head stayed high, seemingly accepting the new life she would have to live out in the Forest- but she couldn't help but silently fear the moment where she would have to let go.

Days Later...

"Now, you're gonna have to throw like this."

"This?"

"Hmmf- you have to use more of your shoulder! Watch me."

Bracing his arm into the air, Snowball hoisted the boulder over his shoulder with a soft grunt. He clenched his teeth, giving himself a quick swing before forcefully throwing the giant stone into the air and out of the backyard that they stood in. Grassy, whose curiosity twinkled in his eyes, observed the larger object's movements, making mental notes on the trick he had aimed to teach him. Whirling through the air, the boulder crashed into the grounds of a nearby office building, the impact blowing a cloud of dust in its every direction. Had the city been occupied (like it had been in the distant past), perhaps someone could have stomped out, angered by the sudden disruption of their daily routine.

Not even the souls of the past lingered near, as a silence blanketed through the air once more. Brushing his hands free from any dirt, the ball of snow would turn to face the smaller object, a mischievous smile on his face.

"If you can throw like that," he proclaimed. "You'll be able to throw the others around in no time!"

"Grassy thinks he can do it!" Grassy's blades wriggled with excitement, quickly running around the taller one as he tried to find

something he could throw. Snowball rolled his eyes, smiling and quickly following the younger object.

"Now, hold on- let me find something that you can-"

"Grassy thinks this will do!"

To his dismay, Grassy pointed towards a large chunk of metal that laid on the other side of the house. It was more scrap if anything, but from his guess, it could have belonged to a vehicle of some sort- that, or a piece of a building that had been weathered off.

Snowball crossed his arms. "Think you can pick it up?" he asked, turning towards the bundle of grass with a quick up and down glance. Grassy smiled, making his way towards the metal, giving it a quick knock. The cold surface pricked at Grassy's hand, serving as a mere reminder of the changing seasons that they had arrived upon.

It didn't take him too long to ultimately grab the piece with both hands. Within the blink of an eye, Grassy hoisted the large chunk into the air, quickly hoisting it over his shoulder as he kept Snowball's previous movements in his mind. A swing, a huff, and a smile, and the metal was soon thrown into the air, quickly flying towards the direction of the abandoned office building.

The sound of shattering glass echoed through the streets. Flinching, Grassy quickly held his ears, not realizing that the piece of metal had broken into the old facility; Snowball, on the other hand, was over the moon at the sight. He clapped, quickly going over to give a celebratory pat on the back to the bundled grass.

"Now THAT was a good throw." He cackled, kneeling down to his level. "You're a fast-learner, kid! I gotta say- you're starting to impress me."

"Grassy wants to impress so he can ex- exss... exsssuh... uh.." Grassy's words began to trail off, his mouth curling with confusion at the pronunciation of the foreign word.

Catching onto this, Snowball raised an eyebrow. "Excel?"

"Grassy wants to excel!" His smile brightened with Snowball's help,

tilting his head up to face the other object. "Grassy has to catch up on all his funny doings!"

"Did Blocky teach you all of his tricks?"

"Mm-hm! The one with the lake is super funny!"

"What- with Firey's recovery center?"

"Yes! Grassy wants to be like Blocky- he wants to make his own funny-doings one day!"

"And I think he's doing a fantastic job!" The sudden voice made the two look up, their gaze immediately falling onto the wooden block. He walked over, a smile painted onto his face from the conversation that fell onto his 'ears'. In an instant, a gasp would burst from Grassy's mouth, springing into the air and running straight towards Blocky for a big hug.

"BLOCKY!!" Grassy squealed. Blocky's arms lifted in surprise, the sudden contact nearly throwing him off, but a laugh bubbled from his throat as he wrapped his arms around the green object, scooping him up. Grassy made sure to be careful- as the bruises on Blocky's body were still recovering, and that eye of his was still recovering from the blow that hit him.

"Hey there, kiddo! Having fun with Snowball?" He asked, carefully containing the excited movements of the little one. Grassy nodded, happily looking up.

"Yeah!"

"He's been doing pretty well with my lessons." Snowball interjected, smiling as he nudged Blocky on the arm. "He's learning after the best, after all!"

Hearing the words from his closest friend made a smile rise on Blocky's face. He shook his head, laughing quietly as he hoisted the object onto the top of his head, letting him sit on his surface as he got a greater view of the world around him. His curiosity was endless. After being trapped in the TLC for so long, he had nearly forgotten the sweet sense of freedom; the thrill that buzzed through his veins

when he stood in a new world, ripe for discovery.

Grassy was over the moon at his newly found freedom. And with Blocky, Snowball, Basketball, and Robot Flower by his side, he realized that a new beginning awaited his brand new family.

Of course, life found a way to interfere with the younger object's vision. He knew that the others around him had to "get to work"- it was what the older objects did, after all- yet, this would bring a dash of sadness into his heart, with his family now becoming stuck in their own work and projects.

He wanted them all to stay together! To grow together, to become a team and have as much fun as they could, all as a family!

But with Basketball working in the lab, and Blocky being busy with his new funny-doing planning, he was often left under Snowball's care. Grassy couldn't complain. He taught him a lot of fun stuff, even teaching him how to stand up for himself when he was getting teased! Yet, there would be times where Blocky would take Snowball with him, and Grassy would be left with another face from the TLC group.

It was beginning to get to him, as a quiet loneliness would tug at his mind, his blades drooping ever so slightly at the thought. Blocky could feel the sudden drop in the kid's attitude, his eyes lifting to meet his gaze.

"You okay there, kid?" he asked. When his hand lifted to the sky, Grassy hesitantly clutched it, his tiny hands pulling Blocky's close to himself. From the hold alone, Blocky could tell that something was bothering the kid.

"Grassy just thinks that he's.. very lonely." The younger object rasped out, quickly averting the gaze of the two boys before him. "Blocky works a lot on his funny doings... and Basketball works every day in the science muse-... mooose.."

"Museum?"

"Everyone works a lot. And Grassy gets sad.."

Playfully, Snowball would reach over, ruffling the kids blades with a smile. "What- are you not enjoying the time you spend with the coolest guy in the world?!"

The bundle of grass couldn't help but giggle from the contact, quickly shaking his head. "No! Grassy loves Snowball's funny doings, too! Grassy just wants... hmm..."

Admitting the truth was hard for him, he had to give it that. Grassy was thankful to have awesome objects to take care of him and be by his side, but at the end of the day, they each had their own lives and responsibilities to cater to. Time was incapable of ever stopping for a chance to savor in the moment, and in the end-

"Grassy feels lonely... he needs a friend."

A mere sentence that made the younger one look down, shame hanging over his head. He never wanted to complain, or make anyone feel bad about this- but when everyone was off doing their own things, he wanted to at least have someone he could play with, someone else who could make cherished memories with.

Snowball raised an eyebrow at the kid's statement. "You have a friend right here."

"Dude." Blocky immediately cut him off, glaring daggers towards him. Confused, Snowball would let his eyes glance around, raising his arms in defense at his sudden harshness.

"What?" He asked, keeping his voice low. "What did I say?!"

For someone as cool as him, Snowball was painfully unaware of himself. Being one of his best friends made Blocky understand that rather quickly, yet it wasn't something that bothered him before. The moment they had all met (being Snowball, Pen, Eraser and himself), he embraced the fragments that made them who they were, flaws and all. It was their friendship that made his life a blast to go through.

Yet, hearing the kid admit the loneliness that he was trapped in felt like shards of glass piercing through his mind. Grassy was an absolute joy to have around (especially when he realized that a Funny Doings

Jr. was on the rise), but in the end, he was still his own person; someone who deserved to make his own friends and memories, just like Blocky.

Tentatively pulling his hand away, Blocky would gently lift the smaller object off from his head, despite his weakened attempts to make him let go. He wrapped his arms around him, his gaze falling onto the wriggling bundle of grass.

"C'mon' buddy," He began. "Why didn't you tell me sooner..?"

"Grassy was scared." The younger one murmured.

"Scared?"

"Grassy didn't want to upset Blocky... o-or Snowball.. or Basketball- or Robot Flower!" His head lifted, revealing the worry that flooded in his soul. "Grassy loves everyone, he doesn't wanna make anyone sad!"

"Who said you were making anyone sad? Grassy- the fact that you had to hide this is enough to make me worry!" Blocky's words made Grassy wince with guilt.

"G-Grassy's sorry..."

All Blocky could do was hug him closer, hushing him underneath his breath. "No no. There's no need to be sorry."

"Blocky's right! You gotta stand up for yourself kid- looks like I gotta teach you more ways to fight." Snowball interjected, tapping his chin in thought. Blocky couldn't help but roll his eyes at his best friend, before he looked down, speaking once more.

"You deserve a chance to be heard, Grassy. I promise. The fact that you opened up to me was enough to show just how much of a brave object you can be.

"Brave..?" Grassy whispered.

"That's right. You're already on the path of an honorary Funny-Doer, if I do say so myself!"

Relief bloomed in Blocky's soul as he watched that familiar, child-like smile return to Grassy's face. Snowball would nod in agreement, crossing his arms triumphantly.

"You're gonna go so far, Grassy." He smiled, raising his fist into the air. "I can see it now- you'll be plowing through the rest of these losers with NOTHING standing in your way!"

Grassy couldn't help but giggle at the thought. His blades curled and waved excitedly, as Blocky would kneel down, placing him back onto the ground with his hands clasping gently onto his shoulders. This is how they stay for mere seconds, their eyes soon catching on to one another.

Pride wasn't enough to describe how Blocky felt. Seeing the joy and excitement glowing in Grassy's green eyes were enough to enliven that heart of his. Empathy was never something Blocky carried, but when the kid first came across his sight in the TLC, something told him that his life would soon flip for the better.

For Grassy, it was no different. A hidden wisdom was buried deep within his fath- his FRIEND'S gaze. But that recklessness and chaotic energy still thrived, and it was enough to make Grassy stand up, staring in awe at the object before him.

"Snowball's right. You've got such a spark to you, buddy- and that is going to get you farther than you could ever imagine. But for now, I want to help you get some fun memories of your own!" He reassured, watching as Grassy looked up.

"You mean.."

"In fact- you had me thinking... there's a little someone in Bozo Brain Bossy-Bot's lab, someone who might need another person to play with." Blocky smiled, giving Grassy a gentle nudge on his arm. "You think you'd like to make a new friend while Snowball and I work?"

In an instant, the younger object sprang in excitement, his hands fluttering rapidly as he grinned. "Grassy likes new friends! Let's go!"

Golfball had no idea as to what she should do with her life.

The brief feeling of home and comfort she had found with Tennis Ball had perished, sinking beneath the tainted soils around them. Her legs aimlessly work, wandering left and right, measuring chemicals and compounds, or tinkering with the machinery that had grown so foreign to her. Hours pass blindly, the sun rising and falling as time dwindled away into the gaping void within her mind.

She never got to save the others.

She failed.

She wouldn't ever admit it, no- but the mere thought was a parasite, draining her of every ounce of energy she had.

Turning, she grabbed a notebook, silently flipping through its pages. She wasn't upset. She wasn't sad, not even angered. The emotions that once settled in the core of her being had long vanished, being replaced with the eventual migraines that would crack through her aching skull.

Once every recovery was completed, the realization that the future was a blank slate disturbed her. She had everything laid out perfectly, a plan for every scenario, twist and turn that life could possibly throw at them. But all of her knowledge was muted, buried beneath the garden of nightmares that plagued her very soul. No matter what she tried- sleeping, resting, lazing- that knowledge of hers doesn't materialize. It was all still in there, only muted by what she could perceive, as emotions.

So now, here she was. Blankly working the hours away to try and surface those familiar facts that she carried with her. The sports ball's ability to do the simplest of things were lost; giving herself a list of

blank commands that would lead her through each second.

Grab the wire. Drill the pieces together. Fill the beaker with C9H8O4. She works with rigid movements, her pace as slow as a sloth. Measure the molecular weight, Golfball.

Rarely anyone has seen her. More often than not, she can overhear the conversations that are being held outside, the fresh minds of undamaged contestants going about their day and finding new adventures to hold. If anything, their actions are nothing short of arrogant. They're going about their day as if nothing is wrong, as if something horrifying DIDN'T happen to their peers! It brings a flicker of anger to her soul, but it dissipates as she sinks back into her work.

"Golfball..?"

Nevermind. There was the flicker once more.

"What is it." She spats out robotically, not bothering to turn towards the larger sports ball behind her. Tennis Ball frowned, hesitantly tapping his foot on the ground at the tone of her voice.

"W-Well... It's been- a while since you've gotten some proper sleep-"

"Slept two days ago."

"Two days- Golfball, that's not good! What are you even doing?!"

"Working."

Oh no, he thought to himself. She's doing it all over again...

"Hey- how about we step outside for a little bit?" Tennis Ball suggested, gently stepping to the side. "It's pretty warm today- 12.8 degrees, fare- I mean, celsius!"

"Busy."

"But what about-"

"I am busy." The smaller scientist grit through her teeth, not thinking twice about the attitude that came off of herself. "Now stop asking

me."

"Golfie, please- you're burning yourself out!"

"Go away, TB."

"But I can't just-"

"GO!" The sudden yell that burst from her was enough to make her flinch. It's echoes pierced through her skull, practically activating a new migraine to ruin her day.

Great. Just great.

She shut her eyes, adjusting her glasses as she tried to keep the little grains of composure she had, not giving her lab partner a single glance. Ruining it all, as always- life didn't have to prove that to her.

Tennis Ball stared, grimacing at the state that his girlfriend was in. He knew just how stubborn she could be, as this all happened before, when things simply seemed out of the ordinary. Of course, it was before it all went downhill, and Tennis Ball had the strength to comfort her, and get that rationality back into her mind.

But now, things were becoming serious. She no longer spared a passing glance, ignoring both him and Rocky when they tried to confront her. Those eyes that he had fallen for, so long ago, were now glued to the inventions and chemical solutions before her, despite the exhaustion that strained them.

Once she began to jot down some notes, Tennis Ball sulked, trudging out of the room in defeat. He passed by the room that the two had once shared, a room where the ghosts of their former selves could be seen conversing and sleeping; past the break room, where the table was littered with mugs and food wrappers, and once he passed Rocky's door, his sight fell upon the main room- the recovery center still in its spot, and Basketball looking through a closet filled with beakers and tools.

He cleared his throat. Looking up, the orange sports ball would walk over, frowning at the saddened aura from her cousin.

"How's she holding up..?" She asked. Tennis Ball shook his head, his eyes locked onto the ground. "Is she still not listening...?"

"She hasn't slept for two days." He whispered.

"Gosh- TB, how on Earth did you get with someone so uncompromising?? You're the complete opposite of her!"

Tennis Ball pouted. "That never mattered to me."

"Well, did she say anything this time around?"

"She just told me she was busy... working on- whatever she's working on."

The tears forming in Tennis Ball's eyes were enough to make Basketball step to his side, carefully helping him take a seat at a nearby table.

"We just need some more time," she assuaged, her gaze falling upon him. "I made some more progress today- we can see if this compound could work for the capsules you have.."

"I don't think anything will work at this point. After all- I... I'm not the inventor, here." He murmured. "Whatever I make, falls apart. Sure, Golfball is here- but she won't listen."

"Tennis Ball..."

"I thought I finally had a chance to- be more with her... to be more than a lab partner- MORE than friends. Before everything, I knew what to do, and somehow it had worked out. We pulled through it all, together." Tears began to break past the corners of his eyes, yet Tennis Ball didn't care. He turned his head when Basketball tried to hand him a tissue.

"But weeks after we started off, WEEKS after I had the courage to actually kiss her- we were both killed. And now, I don't know what she sees me as anymore. I've tried helping her through everything, but with Rocky under our wing, I'm scared that I'm not helping them enough."

"And now, you don't have to strain yourself anymore." Basketball affirmed, gently picking up a box of tissues and placing them on the table. "Not only are you all back- but we're here to help in any way that we can."

Frowning, Tennis Ball gazed towards her. "..and what about Golfie... do you think she doesn't want to-.. be with me anymore..?"

"I dunno- who was the one she returned to when she recovered?"

"Me.."

"And who was the one who got her to calm down after every nightmare she's had?"

"...."

Basketball rolled her eyes at her cousin's silence. "Exactly. She cares about you- stop trying to tell yourself otherwise."

"But what about Rocky? I've been so busy trying to help her, that-"

A loud crash suddenly cut her words off. Startled, the two scientists whirled around to face the staircase, where a piece of metal was slammed into the floor. For a moment, Basketball swore it looked like a fragment of some sort of ship, but the impact from it being thrown caused a few screws to fly loose, one hitting Robot Flower on the side of her head.

"OW!" Her mechanical voice glitched as she whirled around, placing her hands on her hips. "What was THAT for?!"

"It wasn't us- ack, are you okay?!" Basketball rushed over, carefully checking on her lab partner's body. The robot couldn't help but freeze, letting her take a good look at herself, before she shook her head, letting her hands fall onto Basketball's 'shoulders', quickly reassuring the scientist that all was fine.

Tennis Ball couldn't help but notice this, a small smirk growing on his face when he caught the blush that was forming on his cousins' face. All the while, laughter would fill the room, diverting his attention as three objects made their way down the stairs.

"Now THAT'S what I can an entrance!"

"You're killing it, Grassy!"

"Grassy thinks he can do better!!"

Just a few words, and Basketball whirled around at the sound of Grassy's voice. "OMP- Grassy?!"

"Basketball!!" Soon, the bundle of grass would hop from the final step, practically leaping onto the woman's back. She let Grassy climb onto the top of her head, pouting as she quickly pieced the scene together. "Blocky. Snowball. What was THAT?!"

"Just a little funny-doing practice! You know how the kid can be- he wanted to try something new today!" Blocky replied nonchalantly, crossing his arms with a small shrug.

"And what kind of prank involves THROWING A MACHINE down the stairs?!"

Without thinking, Blocky's eyes slid towards Snowball. It wasn't intended, but instantly, the other object quickly raised his hands in defense.

"What?! The kids' got strength- he's gotta put it to good use!"

Giggling, Grassy would snuggle on the top of Basketball's head, listening to the jabber that was going back and forth between the three. His mind was already blowing away with the wind, and thankfully so, as Basketball stomped towards the two with anger running through her veins.

"You two need to be careful," She began. "These pranks are getting out of hand!"

"These are called, "Funny-Doings", Basketball. And they're harmless!"

"He threw a ship down the STAIRS."

"I know! Pretty cool, right?"

An exasperated sigh broke through her mouth. "I'm starting to think you two are bad influences for him..."

"HAH! Us?!" Snowball cackled. "If anything, you're a bad influence- you're just a weak armless LOSER who's too much of a wimp to TRY and defend herself!"

Oh. Robot Flower had to hold her back for that one- Basketball could practically feel the anger boiling through her chest like a steaming pot. She never understood why Grassy clung onto these two brutes- they were the LAST objects that could ever care for a child. She was surprised that Grassy hadn't gotten hurt from a prank yet!

But the way his eyes would gleam towards the two of them- she could tell that they meant the world to him, and she wouldn't dare question it. Besides, the four had agreed that they would help each other out with the little one, as the work that was left in Yoyle City was too important to leave behind.

Glaring at the ball of snow, Basketball would blink as a pair of metal hands would lie on her side gently.

"Easy." Robot Flower's voice would soothe Basketball, much like the first beam of sunshine after a storm. She would almost lean into the metal palms of her lab part-...

...Hm..

Shaking her head, Basketball would turn towards the wooden cube, much to RF's confusion. "Blocky- Grassy could get himself hurt from all of this. What if he fell down the stairs from throwing that thing?"

"Hey, he DIDN'T!" Smirking, Blocky would place a finger on her forehead, tapping at it with every syllable that he spoke. "You gotta relax, B-Ball; that stress is getting to you!"

"Hey! I'm helping out too, y'know!" Robot Flower butted in, stepping towards the shorter object. The sudden firmness from her made Blocky chuckle, simply glancing back up at her.

"Helping?" He mumbled. "I almost mistook you for a piece of scrap."

"Didn't you get beaten up by a literal bubble days ago?"

"You LITTLE-"

"Grassy wants to meet the friend!" The cheerfulness in Grassy's tone made the three look up. His blades were curling and swaying endlessly, even as Robot Flower would scoop him up from Basketball's head, carefully placing him in the center of the group. Blocky, of course, continued to glare at the robotic clone, unamused by the snarky comment she had made before.

"Friend?" The robot asked, her head tilting. "What friend?"

"Blocky said there's a new friend in the lab! Grassy wants to meet him!!"

She wasn't sure as to who he was referring to, at first. Robot Flower was still trying to remember the names of those who were recovered, and from the looks of it, there wasn't anyone in the lab (besides the two sports balls) that he would be excited to know. Yet, for Basketball, it immediately clicked in her mind; quickly turning to face Tennis Ball, who was also overhearing the conversation.

"Do you mean Rocky?" Tennis Ball stood up, making his way towards the three. Rocky perked up at the name, happily waving his hands toward the larger scientist.

"Rocky!" He exclaimed. "Grassy wants to meet Rocky!"

"Hm..?"

The quiet hum of a stranger would make Grassy blink. Confused, the group would watch as the bundle of grass would whirl his head, quickly looking for the source of the sudden voice.

He knew aun- Golfball- was working. He could hear Basketball talking about it And Tennis Ball was right here with everyone else! So who could be...

A pair of grey pupils suddenly made him gasp. There- right in the doorway that led to the other rooms in the lab- there was someone

that was hiding behind the door frame, peeking out every now and then at the sudden noise that erupted from the room.

The eyes that peeked over the corner made Grassy tilt his head. There was a quiet hesitancy that came from the stranger- one that Grassy saw as shyness.

It was okay though- he was shy too sometimes!

Stepping forward, Grassy tilted his head curiously as he spotted the tip of a rock tilting out from the doorway. He immediately relaxes, a smile blooming on his face. He had heard about the little one before- always vomiting left and right with a smile on his face. How could he have forgotten?

"Hi Rocky!" The bundle of grass let the words slip free, rocking himself on the soles of his feet.

A few seconds pass without a response. Then a familiar gray eye edges over the doorway, blinking at the mention of his name.

Grassy smiled. "Rocky... Is that right?"

Rocky hesitated, his eyes nervously lifting to meet Tennis Ball's gaze. Smiling, the sports ball would nod, giving him the gentle reassurance he needed to try and get out of his shell once more. Seeing this would ease the remaining tension in the little one's soul, soon giving the green object a nod in return.

To his surprise, Grassy would approach him, giving him a friendly wave before he spoke.

"I'm Grassy!"

"Oh you've got to be kidding me- ANOTHER armless wimp?!"

"Can it, Snowball."

---

call me GB because my eyesight is getting worse!

hi! the sillies. The goofy. Happy chapter for a happy day. I hope everyone is doing well today.

my last spring break ever is in a week. I'm so ready for that. But, honestly... not much to say today. I do hope you guys enjoy, I HOPE Scarlet's Bloom is living up to Fear Garden's name.

just one more chapter until.... well actually, next chapter will resume the suffering. scratch that.

seeya next time!

~ice

Searching For...

When Firey wakes up, he sleepily brushes his hand on the other side of the bed, his fingers stretching to brush against Leafy's warmth. Instead, they meet the softened crisp of the blankets, flopping down onto the blank canvas of the cover sheet. Weird. She must've had another episode.

Another one? Another one. They were wearing off, day by day, yet each one would still carry the unspoken horrors that Firey couldn't decipher.

Propping himself up on his elbow, he swallowed the lump of guilt that was stuck in his chest, carefully tossing the sheets to the side. One swing and his legs were off the bed, letting his body stretch the exhaustion out of his clicking joints before the sound of footsteps made his head tilt.

"Someone's up late." Leafy spoke so softly that not even a ghost could hear. In her hands was a mug, steam waltzing through the air around her, as well as a yoyleberry and yoyle tomato enclosed in her palms.

It took him a moment to understand. But with a few blinks, he realized the amount of sunlight that had spilled into the room, as if nature was attempting to wake the other by any means necessary. He smiled nervously, giving her a gentle wave.

"Yeesh, how long was I out..?"

"Not too long." Leafy replied softly, walking up to him. "It's only 9:46.."

She reached over, her hand unveiling the yellow fruit. Firey would take the yoyle tomato, stepping away from the bed as the metal would soon melt away, his usual flames bursting and flickering through the air. A gentle glow emitted from his body, giving him

more than enough energy to wake himself up.

Now that he was back, he had to be a lot more cautious with himself. All of his friends weren't the same since he had last seen them, and with the recovery center now back and running, he was quickly introduced to a new set of routines and rules, ones that prevented, what the others kept saying, chaos.

Keep taking a yoyleberry. Don't shout. Keep any mention of trowels away, and, for heaven's sake, keep any and every joke to yourself.

Don't cook for anyone. Don't share anything with ANYBODY. Leave that science museum to rot. And, most importantly: do NOT ask the recovered about the incident.

That was another thing. Since when wasn't the word 'murder' allowed in these parts?

"Where'd you go..?" He asked, covering the yawn that slipped from his words. Goodness, it had been so long since the two had some time together; the sight of Firey never failed to make the lemon leaf smile.

"I woke up early." Leafy took a sip of the drink in her hands. "You were out like a light; I didn't want to bother you."

"Cmon' Leafster," Firey chuckled underneath his breath. "I wouldn't have cared at all. We could've watched the sunrise together!"

"Firey- you were snoring."

"That doesn't mean anything!"

He let her laughter fill the room, taking him in. Her voice was like honey, mellifluous with every kind word that danced from her tongue, coating his heart in that golden syrup. Almost always, it was enough to bring a smile to his face.

"Got any plans for today?" he asked, reaching over to take her hand. He was a bit shocked to see how she immediately flinched away, taking a step back before holding her free hand out. The flame nearly went on a worried tirade- afraid that he had done something wrong- but his concerns were washed away as Leafy popped the Yoyleberry

into her mouth, her green hue soon hardening into a solid gray.

Oh, he cringed at his ignorance. Right. His flames. Leafy would take a quiet sip of her drink, a soft sigh escaping her throat as she let her fingers outstretch, carefully intertwining with his.

"I dunno," she murmured, not noticing the smile that grew on Firey's face. "I still am a little bit sleepy- even with this coffee, heh..."

"Is it Golfball's brew?" Firey asked.

"No- Tennis Ball's. I got it two days ago, when you and Coiny were taking a walk through the city. Says it's a new concoction, or something- but it was scrapped from another project he's working on for the rest of us."

"Ooh, is this a surprise??? A 'welcome back to Yoyle City' gift?!"

"Hah, I wish... He wants to help out with the night terrors everyone's been having, so I think he's trying to make something that can help us sleep..?"

Firey couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. "What- like melatonin?"

Leafy nodded. She would let her head lean against his shoulder, her gaze swiftly meeting the floor. "He said it should be ready by today- he mentioned how he wanted everyone by the lab around 4."

"Maybe we could do that, then!" The sudden burst of energy made Leafy jump, lifting herself from him with a smile.

"What- rounding everyone up?"

"Yes! That works perfectly!" Being aware of the mug, Firey took her free hand, squeezing it gently with determination. "I've been meaning to talk to everyone again, I want to see how they're holding up!"

He didn't dare mention the fact that he wanted to ask them what had happened. Come on, it was his chance! He didn't mind helping Leafy for the past few weeks- her health worried him to his coal-centered core- and despite how surprised he was over Coiny's new leaf, he gave him a hand, helping him through the grief that he had been

experiencing.

Pin had killed him, yes- but Firey couldn't understand the severity of her actions. All the rumors confused him, and for Coiny, he wanted to help him through it as best as he could, despite the warnings he received from the TLC-er's.

With that charming grin of his, he let his eyes meet Leafy's, letting their fingers intertwine like a shining ribbon. "We can do it- u-unless, you'd like to rest! I know you said you were sleepy.."

The sincerity in his voice stung at the lemon leaf's heart. Goodness, what a bitter reminder. Leafy's smile would slightly fade, her hand carefully squeezing Firey's and pulling it closer. It was subtle- but how could she forget?

He was the first to go.

Confused by the lacking response, Firey would look back towards her. That familiar gleam in Leafy's green eyes had vanished- instead, tears took their place, flooding her vision and blurring the view of everything around her.

Crap.

Quickly, Firey would try to help her. "Hey, I didn't mean it that way-"

"No no- sorry.." Her hushed response made her grip loosen, carefully placing the mug on the bedside table before placing her now-free hand over his. "I just..."

She let his eyes rest on him, taking him in. Firey's eagerness to explore and meet with the others was an energy that Leafy did not want to dismantle. She was tired of hurting- tired of hurting others, tired of being angered, tired of holding anything and everything against the world. There was no way she wanted to hold Firey back.

It's the least she could do after stealing what should have been his.

Hugging him close, she shut her eyes, feeling his surprise. "I'm just so happy to be back.."

"Aw, Leafy..."

"It's true!" she sniffled, smiling as she pulled away. Her hands would tenderly hold onto Firey's face, fighting the exhaustion back with a smile. "And I refuse to waste another second of our time here- we've got a lot of catching up to do! Cmon' Fireball- let's get the news out!"

The smell of bacon filled the tense air of the new clubhouse.

Gosh, should they even call it a clubhouse? It was far beyond what the original stood to be- with its giant flat-screen TV, the multitude of flashing party lights, massive speakers and rooms that suited their needs and all. So many memories were made within those walls, yet it seemed as if these memories were trapped; never to be seen by their present selves, ever again.

The writing utensil stared at the sizzling pieces of bacon in the frying pan, her hand clenching the spatula close. She adjusted the scarf on her neck to try and prevent any grease from staining it, before she flipped the pieces to their back sides.

The house that Pencil had chosen was spacious for all of them. The rooms were comfortable enough. It could use a lot more decorations (and a bit of a better paint job), but for the most part, Pencil couldn't find herself caring as much as she used to. And this scared her.

Every single second of this scared her. She wasn't supposed to be like this. She was never supposed to react this way. Pencil was a leader- someone who was supposed to keep their head up high, and guide her group through any trouble that stood in their way.

But Pin. Oh. Pin killed them off alright. Sure, they were all revived

and back in the city. Yet, their old selves will forever remain buried in that damned garden- dead for the rest of time, as their hollow bodies were now left to wander this haunted city with the memories plaguing their minds.

For Pencil, pieces of her old self still remained, tethered to herself by the scarf that was wrapped (rather tightly) around her neck. She could feel her mind holding itself together, just enough to help guide her friends to a place where they could rest, together. She had the fortitude to cradle her girlfriend- her Match- when those nightmares would cease any rest that she tried to get, poisoning her mind with the memory of her own demise.

Yet, when that scarf loosened, she lost her mind.

Pen would, of course, be there to try and help. She could hear his voice attempting to assuage the panicked thoughts that pierced through her soul. Hell, she could feel the warmth from his embrace, reminding her of the awkward hugs they would force themselves into during those family bonding times (or during family photos- which were the worst). The two were polar opposites, but every hug that her little brother gave her would be enough to ground her, even if it was for a mere second.

Would she ever admit this out loud? No. Not a chance in hell.

There wouldn't be a need to though, for everyone could see the way she would hold onto him; the way her face buried into his shoulder, her body easing itself from its tension as she found a sense of ease in his warmth.

With gentle movements, she would place the cooked pieces of bacon onto the plates beside her, preparing breakfast for the slumbering souls of Freesmart. Pencil found herself awake earlier than usual that morning, and since Match had finally fallen asleep from the burning nightmares that had awakened her before, she decided to try a head start on her routine.

She placed some water into a teapot, carefully lowering it to the stove before flicking it on. A knock on the door would soon catch her attention, brushing her hands clean on a pink kitchen towel before

making her way towards the door. She didn't need to ask who it was- for she could hear Firey's ranting on the other side.

But still, she doesn't hesitate to ask. "Firey?"

"Oh- Pencil! Yeah, it's me! Leafy's here too!"

With a click and a careful swing, the door revealed an exhausted Pencil, her empty gaze falling upon the two. For a second, her eyebrow nearly twitched from unease at the sight of Leafy, yet she reminded herself that those times were far beyond the past, and she sighed.

"What do you want." She uttered. Leafy cleared her throat, prepared to check in on a friendly neighbor, before Firey quickly interrupted her.

"What did she do." He asked eagerly. Confused, Leafy would struggle to find the words to say towards her dearest Fireball.

"Firey, wait!" She began. "That's not what we-"

"Who did what?" Pencil interrupted, raising her eyebrow.

"Oh- sorry Pencil, we didn't mean to start off on such a note. We just wanted to-"

"I-... I know this might sound crazy, but- I'm really confused as to why everything's changed so much." Firey explained, letting his eyes lock onto Pencil's. "I just... want to understand what happened."

Filled with unease, Pencil's neutral expression was quickly dropping into a frown, her now trembling hand clutching at the doorknob. "...Who are you talking about, exactly."

"Huh?? I-I thought you'd know! Pin-"

"Pence-Pence..?"

The sound of Match's voice made Firey perk up. He had grown used to seeing less of his big sister.

It used to be the opposite. After all- it was how life worked. People grew up. They go to school, get jobs, a house, even get married... It was all normal.

Trauma, well, that truly wasn't anything he could have ever predicted in his lifetime. Hell, he could barely understand the idea of it. It's complicated and sneaky, catching up to you at some of the most unexpected times in your life. As the youngest of the two, he was used to being taken care of. He left it all to Match.

But now, all he knows is that Match is in a plethora of pain- wounds that were invisible to the eye, but fresh and aching on the surface of her soul. He wanted to help a little more, but the others kept telling him that she needs space. She needs to rest, to take care of herself and her girlfriend, and talk to the scientists in ways that would sting the wounds even more than before.

Whatever the matter being, it made it difficult for him to see his sister. Throughout the games, he saw less of her. For her own reasons, of course- he knew that alliance of hers was something she took rather seriously- but there were still those tender moments where he missed her.

But now, there she was. There they were- in the same spot, same space of existence. And there was NO way he would pass the opportunity to both help, and know more.

Turning around, Pencil watched as Match shakily made her way towards the door, yawning as she rubbed her face. "Oh- M-Match!"

"Pencil.. who's at the do-"

"MATCH!" Firey's exclamation fell on deaf ears, as he failed to notice the draining colors in Match's face. Leafy frowned, quickly connecting the dots as Firey's warmth radiated from her side. She quickly grabbed a hold of his arm, much to the flames confusion, yet she began to pull him away. But it was too late, as the mere warmth of his body was enough to make Match snap.

"Get out," her voice trembled, her breaths becoming quicker and quicker as the memories burned through her mind. "get out geT OUT

GET OUT GET OUT!!!!"

The sheer panic in her voice made the two flinch. Match's pleas and cries morphed into full-on screaming, as Pencil worriedly tried to soothe her, quickly wrapping her arms around her panicked lover. This only made it worse, as Pencil's body heat only reminded her of the blazing inferno that Pin brought upon her.

While her girlfriend screamed into the sky, Pencil snapped towards the two, infuriated.

"DO YOU THINK THIS IS FUNNY?!" She screamed, quickly bringing Match inside. "NICE JOKE, ASSHOLE."

And with a hard slam from the door, Firey and Leafy stood outside once more, the winds whistling ever so gently around them, as they were too stunned to speak. The hushed silence would continue to surround the two for quite some time, before Leafy stepped away, holding her forehead with an exasperated sigh.

"Firey. What did you mean by "checking on the others", again?"

Her tone was enough to make Firey gulp. Nervously, he wrung his hands together with a crooked smile. "I...Kinda wanted to know more about- what... happened..?"

She looked away.

"..Was it really... that bad..?"

The commotion was enough to wake the other faces in the clubhouse, with Fanny sleepily making her way into the kitchen, using her plug tail to brush the exhaustion from her eyes. Thankfully, Bubble had managed to sleep through the night- but with her missing from Fanny's side in the bed, she begrudgingly got herself up, wanting to look for her lover.

As she stepped into the kitchen, the smell of bacon and eggs filled the air, her tongue sticking out with a dissatisfied look. She would have gone onto a whole tirade about how she "hated the smell of scrambled eggs in the morning", but her words quickly dissipated as her gaze froze upon Match.

Her latte-colored pupils were fixed onto the ground, revealing the dark circles underneath her eyes. The wood-stick was trembling, sitting next to the fridge- which was wide open. A chill swirled through the doorway, making Fanny shiver, her tail swatting at the air,

"Oh my AIR CONDITIONER! Could you CLOSE THAT THING?!" the electrical fan snapped, stomping her feet. With one shake of her head, Match would clench the side of the fridge, simply dragging herself closer to the chill. On the other hand, the sudden exclamation wasn't any surprise to Pencil, as she was silently cracking another egg into the frying pan.

"Good morning to you too," Pencil uttered. "Please just let Match do her thing. She had another one."

Usually, Fanny would bark back at Pencil, not taking any of her demands or stupid comments. She would go against her, trying to prove that she was nothing more than an impolite maniac who needed to learn some basic decency. Yet, hearing her mention Match's panic attack made her tension drain away, carefully shooting another glance at Match.

This time, those latte-colored pupils stared right back at her. Fanny looked away, letting out a half hearted sigh as she didn't say another word on the matter. After all, there were more important people on her mind. Such as-

"Bubble- is she here..?" she murmured, her blades spinning at a slow pace while her body soon followed her awakening. Pencil turned, her scarf swaying with every moment she made.

"She wanted pancakes," the taller object responded.

"Pancakes? I HATE pancakes!"

"Well, you tell her that." Pencil rolled her eyes, carefully placing the dishes onto the table. "She went to grab some groceries at the store- she left a while ago, so I'm sure she'll be back soon."

"You let her go by HERSELF?!" Fanny's angered tone made Pencil flinch. Clenching her teeth, the writing utensil snapped towards her, shoving the spatula in her face.

"LISTEN," she snapped. "She wanted to go before you woke up. So I let her. She's saving us a trip to the store- so BE THANKFUL for once in your life."

Fanny's eyebrows scrunched with anger, a scowl soon stretching across her face. "You could have gone- you clearly had the time to go!! I HATE YOU!"

"Well I hate having non-club members in the NEW clubhouse!"

"I hate the fact that it's still A CLUBHOUSE!"

"It's my decision, especially after EVERYTHING!"

Suddenly, Match's voice pierced through the tension. "Pencil's, like, right... we deserve s-some sense of normalcy here.."

Taken aback, Pencil would drop the spatula, rushing over to carefully check on her lover. She frantically held onto Match's hands, quiet words being exchanged within the gentle chill of the fridge. But this sentimental movement wasn't anything new. In fact, Fanny couldn't give a damn about the situation.

"Normalcy?! What, are you gonna make Book and Ice Cube sleep on the ROOF again?!"

Pencil grunted in annoyance, quickly turning to face the shorter object. "Fanny, relax! Just be thankful we let YOU TWO stay with us."

That was enough to make the sea of hatred boil within Fanny's chest. Angered, she stomped towards the two, before a familiar voice bloomed through the air with a sharp scowl.

"Hey! It's the ONLY way we can get any damn sleep around here!" Flower walked into the kitchen, angrily placing her hands on her hips. "Without them- we'd forget what SLEEP is!"

Fanny couldn't help but squint, watching as the plant would brush her pale petals with an exhausted sigh. There wasn't a single soul in this household (besides Bubble.... And- dammit... Bracelety.) that she trusted. The stories that Bubble had shared about Freesmart sounded like a damning nightmare, one that Fanny wanted to free her from. Bracelety, on the other hand, didn't take any of her words into consideration; she would grin like an idiot and fawn over Ice Cube, repeatedly telling her that "she'd be safe and sound once they managed to break out from the TLC".

That ignorance had long vanished from her. It caught Fanny off her usual guard, of course, but with a heavy heart, she would keep Bracelety by her side, working their way through to bring their girls back.

So now that things were seemingly back to normal, that unease towards Freesmart was looming overhead, like a shark in the vastness of the sea.

"I can't believe I agreed to that..." Pencil's voice cut through Fanny's train of thought, causing her to turn back as she continued to speak. "Now we've got a downer and a loudmouth."

"Well fuck you too." Fanny snapped, smirking as Pencil's eyes soon filled with anger.

"Excuse me?! Don't make me-"

"What? Are you gonna demote me from this crumbling team or something?? Hah, try harder Pencil." Chuckling, Fanny let her plug-

tail flick to its side. "I'm not scared of you."

Oh for Pencil Factories sake, Pencil was starting to get SICK of that electrical fan. Sure, she and Bracelety helped Bubble and Ice Cube sleep with ease throughout their haunted nights- but during the day, they were nothing but parasites, leeching off of their resources with the ugliest faces known to object kind. This resentment blazed through her blood, wanting to do ANYTHING she could to get them OUT.

Yet, she couldn't. She knew she couldn't do anything to Bubble, nor Ice Cube. Those two saved them all- and after watching Bubble beat the ever-loving hell out of Blocky, she did not want to test those waters of hers.

With a heavy sigh, Pencil would glare down at her. "..Screw you Fanny."

"I hate you too." Fanny couldn't stop the smirk that grew on her face.

Infuriated, Pencil would swiftly return to the eggs in the pan, scrambling them silently with the spatula. Although the woman was too cruel for her own good, everyone couldn't help but admit- she was a fantastic cook.

...Well, except for stew. Never ask for stew from Pencil.

Or was it the life-changing events that made her a better cook...?

Yawning, Flower began to turn away, letting her arms stretch into the air to awaken her slumbering muscles. Being woken up from her beauty sleep, she only wanted to try and get some of those lost hours back, but the familiar shimmer of a red gem made her gasp.

Ruby! Gosh, leave it to her to wake up to the sudden commotion in the kitchen. The rest of the Freesmaters are still in their same spots, eyes falling onto the red gem as Flower tenderly wrapped her arms around her. Ruby didn't fight it- welcoming the warmth from her girlfriend with an uneven blink.

This was enough to make Flower scowl, her anger beginning to fill her soul."Look- we woke her up! Cmon' Munchkin- let's get you back

to bed-"

"I'm awake. Can't sleep." Ruby murmured, stifling a yawn in between her words. Gently caressing the shining surface of Ruby's skin, Flower would shake her head, gently bringing Ruby into the kitchen, scowling at Pencil as she walked by.

"Who's the loudmouth now Pencil?!" The bloom hissed, pulling out a seat for her beloved gemstone. Pencil, having had enough, didn't hesitate to snap back.

"Can it, Flower!"

Silence poured into the kitchen once more, with the eventual sizzling from the pan, and the quiet clashing of metal against metal as Pencil scraped the food into several plates. For the kind of gem that she was, Ruby couldn't help but embrace the hush around her, basking in its presence as if it were a spotlight. It gave off a sense of peace, an ease into the fields of the present, where the hopeful rays of sunshine carried endless promises for a better tomorrow.

Ruby let her eyes swim through the kitchen. Usually, it was the sight of a green-and-blue covered book that met her gaze- yet her heart sank as she realized that she wasn't here. Saddened, her eyes quickly trailed back to Flower. She had gotten up earlier than she did- usually, it was the other way around, with Ruby being the one who would become lost in Flower's beautiful, sleeping face. Now, she stood before her, her eyes glaring at their team captain as she wrapped up her cooking.

Even when she was angry, the gemstone's heart couldn't help but flutter at her girlfriend's beauty. The sunlight hit against her face at just the right angle, bringing out the freckles that made the most gorgeous of constellations on her face. Today, her petals looked more like their original pink hue, softly swaying as she continued to move her head. She stands poised, her hands carefully rubbing the back of her neck with-

CRACK. It was almost as if someone had stabbed her through the chest. Nobody did- nobody in this house now would ever do so- but the sudden crack of pain is enough to throw her off balance. She's

lucky Flower had helped her to the kitchen table, otherwise she would have fallen in front of the others, with it becoming the next teasing point for the two wood sickles.

Ruby's eyes shut tightly, and the world soon vanishes. She loses sight of Flower, and instead, she is back in that damned room, the image of a dying Flower soon plastering into her mind, blood and vomit coating the sheets around her.

Flower- her girlfriend, who she failed to save. The woman who Ruby failed to protect.

Claws of anxiety gripped at her throat, squeezing every last breath out of her as her hands began to tremble with unease. The sound of Flower's deathly wheezes and cough drowned out the thoughts that spun endlessly in her mind, her heart beginning to pound violently with panic.

She was dying.

She failed Flower.

She was dying and there was nothing she could do.

She-

"Morning everyone."

With two words, a familiar voice was able to immediately snap Ruby back to reality, her shimmering eyes blinking rapidly as they adjusted back into the Freesmarters' kitchen. She was stunned, frantically looking around at the sights of her friends and girlfriend, before her eyes locked onto the source of the voice herself.

Book.

Within a few seconds, the rest of the Freesmarters' would greet the woman.

"Morning Book." Fanny greeted, leaning against the wall.

"Morning." Match whispered, giving her a slight wave. Raising an

eyebrow, Book was tempted to ask what Match was doing by the open fridge, but she kept the curiosity to herself, quietly greeting the two in return. Swiftly, she passed by the two, silently stepping towards the table.

"Morning.." Flower gave her a timid wave, her heart sinking as Book would turn away. Despite this, Ruby's gaze would shift towards Book, yearning for the moment where she could see her once more.

She knew the mistake she had made. It was the heat of the moment- she knew that now.

But she wanted to make things right. Even as she let her hand carefully stretch through the air, Book would continue to turn away, quietly walking to the fridge and looking through its contents.

The sheet robotic tone of it all made Pencil squint. "Ugh- we sound like robots! Can't someone liven up the energy here!"

"MAAAKE WAY MAKE WAY! ICE CUBES ON HER WAY!"

Yep. Pencil should've kept her mouth shut.

In the doorway, Bracelety had already skipped ahead of herself, excitedly flapping her hands before stretching them to the side. Curious by the sudden burst of energy from the blue bracelet, Fanny gave her a glance.

"Someone's happy." She murmured.

"DUH! OF COURSE I'M HAPPY!!" Bracelety exclaimed. "ICY MANAGED TO GET BACK ON HER FEET! AND LIKE THE QUEEN THAT SHE IS, I'M HERE TO PRESENT HER TO-"

"Yeah yeah, we get it. Get over here Ice Cube." Rolling her eyes, Pencil would finish setting up the dishes, carefully bringing them to the table, one by one.

She called for Ice Cube. Her name. Her. In that moment, Ice Cube could feel herself, as if she were trapped in a dream, carefully making her way into the kitchen. Timidness radiated in those pale eyes of hers, yet she kept it hidden, simply nodding towards the group with a

weakened smile.

"Hi..." Was all she could get out.

Match couldn't help but give her a smile, which made shivers go through Icy's frail body. She knew that they were all trying to be more friendly with her (as they had welcomed everyone into the newly found clubhouse, rather than kicking them out), yet the crazed look in Match's eyes spoke volumes towards her.

She was no fool. She knew why she was happy.

Icy's body always gave off a comforting chill.

The taller woman's hand outstretched towards her. Quickly averting it, Ice Cube makes her way towards Bracelety, smiling as her lover flapped her hands excitedly. It was a simple gesture, one that made Fanny roll her eyes with a quiet chuckle.

"Ugh. Well, now that everyone's awake- let's eat." Pencil's voice soon interjected, quickly snapping her fingers in the air. "I made breakfast for today, making some tea and coffee for anyone who wants some. Flower- you prefer chamomile, right?"

A mere word that sent a chill down Flower's spine. Her pupils shrunk, her head snapping towards the writing utensil with a faint crack. "....What."

Confused, Pencil carefully grabbed the box of tea bags, taking a few out and placing them in their respective cups. "Chamomile- this one is yours, right? Or was it the lavender.."

"Tea..?" Ruby whispered, immediately clutching onto the plant's arm as the memories immediately began to fade back in. Yet, in the slight motion from Pencil's hand, Flower watched as her hope crumbled before her, the beginning of an endless panic dawning over the horizon as it marked the beginning of her own demise. She couldn't move, her body trapped in the agonizing sensations of the past, barely able to comprehend the emotions that hurled through her mind.

But instead of collapsing and weeping at the top of her lungs, Flower

finds herself clenching her fists, straightening herself out with anger filling in the empty craters of her missing emotions.

"Don't."

The sudden change in Flower's tone made Pencil glance back. "What?"

"Move. I'm making my own drink."

"Flower, the water is literally boiling right now- it's done. You need to-"

"Shut the FUCK UP, Pencil." Flower yelled, slamming her fist down onto the table. The dishes rattled from the impact, crumbs of food sprinkling onto the wooden surface. "Let me make my DRINK."

Pencil jumped, immediately frowning as she dropped the bags in her hand. "Hey- HEY! I only wanted to HELP here, I-"

"HELP?! WITH TEA?!" In that instant, Flower slammed into Pencil, knocking her against the counter as she grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her violently. "You were planning to POISON ME!

Fighting. The rest of the Freesmarters immediately scrambled to action, frantically trying to pull the two away from one another. The first kitchen utensil immediately hurls by Pencil's face, causing the other woman to cry out in fear. Match tried to yank Pencil away, slapping at Flower in a panic to try and stun the bloom's vision- yet, this proved to be futile, as Flower was yanking cabinets open, grabbing whatever she could lay her hands on, and throwing it at the bitch before her. Shattering glass would break from the cries and screams of the others, a few shards puncturing Pencil's lower arm. Hissing in pain, she tries to kick Flower in the abdomen, only for her to grab the two ends of her scarf.

Yet, before she could do anything she could regret, a voice overpowered the chaos, followed by the sound of spilt groceries.

"STOP!"

Looking up, Fanny's heart skipped a beat as her eyes fell upon

Bubble. But that flustered aura became bitter, wrapping its thorn-covered vines of worry around her soul. The look of terror in Bubble's eyes immediately made the team back away from one another- including Flower, who stared down at her trembling hands in shock.

This wasn't just it though.

"WHY ON EARTH ARE YOU ALL FOIGHTING?!" Bubble's yells carried boulders of guilt, ones that crushed at her teammates as they listened. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"

"Bubb.." Concerned, Fanny immediately rushed to Bubble's side, her plug tail reaching for her hand- flinching as the transparent object yanked it away, stomping past her lover with her cheeks tainting with a faint red hue.

The yelling- it must have been enough for her.

"ANSWER ME!" She yelled. "WHAT IS GOING ON?!"

Silence. At least, for a moment- as the sound of her own heavy breathing began to ground her from the panic that soared through her veins. Seeing the broken pieces of bloodied glass and cooking utensils, scattered across the kitchen floor, was enough to turn her anger into deep dread.

Oh, great. I spoke back.

She wasn't ever supposed to speak *back*. At all.

And worse- she did so towards Fanny.

Stepping back, Bubble could feel her heart shattering at the realization. The groceries she had gotten now laid upon the ground, adding to the mess that stood all around her. This is it, this is finally it for me, and Bubble hopes that whatever they do is fast enough for her to barely notice. She never dared to speak against her team in such a way- and she could only imagine what they had in store for her. Demotion? Sleeping on the roof? Getting kicked out of the alliance for good?

Silence.

...

Someone gives Bubble's arm a gentle shake, making her blink. She was still frozen, dismayed by the chaos that she had seen, but shocked to find that it was being cleaned up. Bracelety quietly picked up the groceries that Bubble had dropped, placing the sugar, flour and butter in their respective bags, as Flower swept the shards of glass into a dustpan.

The sudden wave of rage brought a splitting migraine to the soap bubble, her head throbbing painfully as her hand instinctively clutched the end of Fanny's plug-tail. Shivering, she finds the saddened glances her team was giving her.

Weren't they- angry..?

Wait...

"No... No wait, oi'm sorry.." Bubble's apologetic tone made the woman look up. Immediately, Fanny would console the soap bubble, hushing her ever so softly before glaring back towards the others.

"You have nothing to apologize for- RIGHT GUYS." Fanny murmured, her glares digging into Pencil's chest like knives. She nodded, gulping nervously as she placed the teapot back onto the stove.

It was all so new to Bubble- so foreign- that it filled her empty soul with unease. She was never used to anyone listening to her, hell, nobody bothered to bat an eye whenever she was struggling. There was no way she would ever admit this to anybody, but after all the time she had spent with Freesmart, she came to realize that she was nothing more than a doormat, letting her team members walk all over her.

Now? With everyone listening to what she had to say, and being mindful of how she was?

It made Bubble sick.

"Y-You goiys can-... keep... cooking..." She spoke softly, almost as if she were terrified of waking the dead.

"No no! We don't want to cause too much trouble here." Pencil whispered, quickly picking up the scattered bags of tea, "C'mon, I made breakfast for everyone, but the stove is open and ready to use. F-Flower- go ahead, I'm so sorry I-"

"I should be sorry here!" Flower interrupted, wringing her hands together nervously. "Forgive me, I-I let my anger get the best of me!"

Who was this??

Who WERE these people???

Pencil never listened to a word she said- she never took anything into consideration, unless it was for Freesmart themselves. And Flower?! Since when was she the type to APOLOGIZE after her own FITS?!

"Oi really didn't mean to yell," says Bubble. "O-Oi just panicked... oi came back, and-"

"Bubble, i-it's okay." Pencil hissed softly as Match shakily tended to her wounds, wrapping gauze around the cuts from the glass. "T-there's no need to be a hero anymore, it-.. we were just being stupid."

Hero.

A crease appears between Bubble's eyebrows as she frowns. "Oi'm.. not a hero."

"We would agree, if it, like, wasn't true." Match stated quietly, adjusting the bandage on Pencil's arm. "You stopped her- m-making you a, like, hero of Yoyle City."

Hero.

Bubble thinks back to what things would have been like if they had found out earlier- discovering Pin's misdeeds and putting an end to her killing spree. "W-Whoiy do you see me as a hero?" She asked.

Ruby comes over, gently placing a hand on the soap bubble's shoulder. "I-I think what they're trying to say, is that- you made it to the end. Unscathed and all- but instead of letting her win, you took

her down with you. She would've gone on if it weren't for you.."

Her stomach turns at her words. Immediately, she clenches her fists, unable to stop her voice from rising.

"I don't WANT to be labeled as a hero!" Bubble then shouted, her fingers digging into the core of her palm. Her nails threatened to break the skin, shivering from the sheer amount of strength she had- it was enough for Fanny to quickly wrap her plug-tail around her wrist.

Her rich, blue eyes would meet Bubble's gaze. "Bubble."

"You don't get it! NOBODY gets it!" Tears flooded the poor objects vision. She forcefully tugged away from Fanny's plug-tail hold, shaking her wrist free from its wrapped state. "Whoiy does everyone thoink that of me?!"

"Because you're the one who put her down." Pencil uttered, carefully placing her injured arm down. "Y-You, prevented her.. from getting everyone in the TLC.."

"And you thoink I wointed that?! You think I wointed to watch everyone DIE?! That doesn't make it WORTH ANYTHING!"

"Bubble-"

"LOOK AT MY ARMS!" Wailing, Bubble forcefully dug her nails into the permanent scars etched into her skin. "SHE DID THIS TO ME! SHE DID THIS TO ME AND NOW IT WON'T GO AWAY!"

"Bubble, don't you get it?! Those scars serve a PURPOSE." Snapping, Pencil turned to face her, unable to process the words that broke past her lips. "You FOUGHT until the moment you died, and you prevented her from getting EVERYONE ELSE! You stayed alive until the very end!"

"I NEVER WANTED TO! I HAD TO WATCH ALL OF YOU DIE!"

"AND YOU AVENGED US!"

"THAT DOISN'T MEAN ANYTHING!" A noose of guilt tightened

around Bubble's 'neck', her eyes flooding with tears as she clasped her hands over her own head. "OI'M- OI HURT PEOPLE! OI HAD TO HURT PEOPLE!"

"SHE DESERVED TO BE-"

"NO!!"

Suddenly, her words erupted from her very soul, spilling its contents onto her wide-eyed team. "SHE LOID TO US- LOID TO ME! AND BECAUSE OF THAT- OI- OI GAVE HER UP! OI GOT HER KILLED!"

"Who?!" Flower shouted.

"BOOK!"

Ruby's feet back up instantly as her mind suddenly goes blank with shock. She didn't have the chance to properly understand the situation that had happened after her own death- but hearing Bubble admit that she was the reason behind her death was enough for her to move away from her.

And not only that, but her eyes peered towards Book- who now stood frozen, like a deer in headlights, her fists clenched tightly as the tears now ran down her scarred cover. The gemstone didn't hesitate to whisper her name, before Book swiftly darted outside of the kitchen, silencing the sobs that broke past her lips.

Seeing this, Pencil immediately turned back towards Bubble, ignoring the fiasco behind her. "You still stopped her. YOU STOPPED HER."

"THAT DOESN'T MAKE IT WORTH IT!" Between sobs and gasps for air, Bubble struggled to keep herself together, her frustration bringing the red back to her cheeks. Fanny couldn't help but try and ease her, using her plug-tail to caress her face, but the woman snapped her head away, tears now pouring down like endless waterfalls.

Seeing this only conflicted Pencil. Being a hero- it meant being seen and adored by EVERYONE around you. Bubble had accomplished something so indescribably brave- she couldn't understand how Bubble didn't want to be revered by her peers.

It should've been her, after all. She had promised to protect them.

And, she failed.

"WHAT ABOUT FANNY, HUH?!" Pencil then screamed, clutching at her own scarf with a tight grip. "BRACELETY?! YOU PREVENTED PIN FROM GETTING THEM- HELL, YOU SAVED THEIR LIVES, JUST AS MUCH AS OURS!"

That was it.

With a clean swing, Bubble slammed her fist against the wall, causing a tremor to shake through it. Cracks and pieces flew off as the impact left a small crater, ringing the bells of fear in the Freesmarter's minds.

Despite standing her ground with a stern look, for the first time in her life, Fanny couldn't help but feel intimidated. This wasn't the same Bubble she had gotten to know when she was trapped within the TLC- yet, she HATED dwelling on the past, and she was ready to embrace the Bubble that would exist with her freedom from that stupid box.

But seeing as to how damaged she was from the event- oh, she couldn't help but HOPE that she had any capability of helping her through this.

Fanny hesitantly reached for Bubble's hand, keeping her voice low to ease her lover. "Bubble- hey.. why don't we-"

"No. Oi need to be alone."

The sentence made Fanny flinch, her hunched posture suddenly loosening from shock. She- Did she really snap at her like that?

No, she couldn't have. Fanny reached for her, carefully trying to place her tail on the side of her cheek to try and console her to the best of her abilities. But Bubble limply swatted her tail away, a silent rage seething from her with every movement she made, as she stomped out of the kitchen, leaving a heavy silence behind.

"Come on dude- we could totally explore the factories around here!"

"..."

"No? W-What about tying our legs together- like old times! That'd be fun, right??"

"Firey. You're not helping." The bitterness that radiated from Fries' response was enough to make Firey's flames dim, his aura softening from the intimidation that he felt towards the guy. Beside him was Gelatin, who, although familiar with Firey, was cowering behind the carton of potatoes, his pupils fixed on the flame himself as he tried to speak to him.

Although it took him a while, Firey had managed to convince the family to follow him towards the lab. Leafy had gone to get the Freesmarters (where they had now banned him from ever growing near), and he knew that it'd be best to help someone who he had known for quite a while.

Besides- Gelatin and Firey were best friends. They had their good times- memories that would last for a lifetime. But whatever atrocities Pin had committed easily overpowered the good, as his usual, jokester self was out of commission. He didn't know where the real Gelatin had gone.

Yet, this wasn't going to stop him from getting him back.

Leading the three through the city, Firey would look around, trying to brighten the mood between them.

"So!" He laughed nervously, "Yoyle City! I haven't explored much of it just yet- but, I want to know: are there any cool places I should check out?"

Silence. Awkward silence, if he may add. Fries continued to walk, his gaze fixed onto the sidewalk beneath him; Puffball being no different. She looked left and right, not really paying attention to the words that Firey was saying. And Gelatin...

"C'mon'- you guys gotta have a favorite place!" Firey smiled nervously, giving the dessert a playful finger-gun. "Hit me up here!"

"The dumpster." Huffing, Fries shot a glare down at him. "Now go take a hike."

"Hey! First off, we're going to GB's LAB here. SECONDLY, I will not- unless it's with Blob-Boy!"

Firey couldn't help but laugh at the nickname. Unfortunately, for him, the three stared right back down, their blank expressions carrying the endless weight of annoyance and anger.

"We're tired, Firey." Puffball murmured, quickly glancing back and forth at the dead air around her. "The only reason why we're here is because of TB."

Ouch. That one hit the poor flame, striking him right in his coal-coated heart. A twinge of sadness flowed through his core as he clenched his fists, but it quickly flickered into anger, his eyes glaring back at the three before him."

"Is it really that hard to try and, oh, I dunno- LIGHTEN UP around here?!" He snapped.

There it was- the words that made a switch flip inside of Fries. Clenching his teeth, he would forcefully swallow the words that crawled up his throat, angrily turning towards the shorter contestant, a dark cloud of anger painted onto his face. He didn't care if Firey's flames were mere inches away from himself, as the seething anger was enough to overpower any heat that Firey gave off.

"This has to STOP. RIGHT NOW. This- game, or personal adventure that you're trying to accomplish here, where you're trying to pride yourself in being much more than what you already are- It's not going to WORK."

"What?! It's not like that Fries, I-" Firey was cut off by Fries' rising hand.

"Oh DON'T ACT SO STUPID, FIREY. It IS like that!" He shouted. "After everything, we're all trying to rest and move on from what happened to us. Being brought back was nothing short of a miracle, but after seeing the state EVERYONE was in, I realized that this was only the beginning of a NEW nightmare!"

"Fries-"

"Every single one of us has to carry the memories of what she did. Every single one of us has to suffer through the nightmares, all because of-" Suddenly, Fries found the name trapped in the center of his throat. He thought he could- he was so sure he would be able to say her name with ease.

But there it was. Trapped, clawing at his throat, and preventing him from taking a deep breath.

Firey watched helplessly, as Puffball would catch onto the rising tension from her partner. Although she resided within his carton, she would give the top of his head a gentle nuzzle, quiet whispers of comfort coming from her.

"Hey- it's okay," she hummed. "You're okay..."

It didn't take too long for him to return. Taking a deep breath, his hand rose to intertwine with Puffball's fur, before he glared down at the flame once more.

"I left my family alone for a mere moment- and they died. They died, and I wasn't there to save them." He huffed out. "And I refuse to EVER let that happen again!"

Death. This was a mention of death- from someone who had lived through it all. It made Firey's eyes twinkle for a mere second, before the weight of Fries' gaze crushed any remaining ounce of motivation within him.

The poor flame flinched, quickly backing away from the three with his hands raised defensively. "O-Okay, okay! I get it! Jeez, I'm sorry!"

His apology fell onto deaf ears. Fries would catch his breath, silently walking past the flame with Puffball shaking her head in mere annoyance. Though the two made their way forward, they didn't notice Gelatin, who stayed behind with the flame, his eyes locked onto the other objects glowing orange pupils.

The more anxious he is to speak, the more it eludes him. Although the curiosity of knowing what happened swelled in the back of Firey's mind, he couldn't help but capture those petrified eyes of his. Usually, he'd brush it off, immediately returning to the burning question that ate at his soul- but seeing the horror in your best friend's eyes made something turn inside of him, his lips pressing together as he swallowed the questions back.

A quiet commotion could be heard in the distance. Perhaps it was the others, already on their way to the lab- would Leafy be waiting for him? Should Firey try and pry at Gelatin some more? Was it worth the well-being of a close friend?

Firey catches his feet carefully approaching him. He's only a few feet away, before he spoke, "Have you gotten any rest..?"

Gelatin stares, but he flinches a tad bit, hesitantly taking a step back. "..Still waking up a lot. Y'know... the nightmares, and the screaming. Either or."

He goes beside the dessert with ease, keeping his distance so as to not burn him. The empty streets of Yoyle City now had tiny figures making their way through; he wasn't sure if they were old friends or former TLC-er's. "Well, TB said he's making something to help you all with that."

"With what?"

"The nightmares."

"...Do you get them too?"

Hearing the question, Firey couldn't help but pout. "I... I dunno."

"Probably shouldn't have asked." Gelatin murmured.

"No no- it's okay, I promise! Hell, I shouldn't have approached you guys like that," The flame admitted, guilt rising from his voice. "I... really should have thought this through."

Shrugging, Gelatin would let his gaze fall to the floor, silently brushing against the small weeds that grew in the crevices of the cracked sidewalk. Firey rubbed the back of his head, his feet shuffling slightly as he tried to find his way out of this awkward silence.

Awkward? No. Not like that- it was him who was making it awkward. He had to make it right.

"..Are you.. sure you're okay..?" Hearing Firey's question, Gelatin couldn't help but freeze, a strange sensation blanketing over the tension in his bones. Lifting his head, he would turn to face the flickering flame, stunned at the suddenness of his question- hell, not even that- but the question itself.

Was he okay? Firey didn't seem like the kind of guy to ask it out of the blue. His curiosity always got the best of him- it blinded him of any consequence that could stand in his way. His emotions were sparked by any event that triggered them, ultimately leading him down a spiral of assumptions.

But hearing the genuine concern in voice, Gelatin couldn't help but wonder if he was playing, or if he was being serious. Perhaps it was the weight of the moment, or the weight of everything that he had gone through, but before Gelatin could open his mouth, he felt a hand grab at his arm.

Seems like Fries realized that he had fallen behind.

Wrapping his fingers around the green object's arm, he wasted no time in waiting, gently tugging him towards the path of the laboratory.

"Wh- Fries- " Gelatin stuttered out, trying to catch up to his pace. He would glance at Firey every now and then, frowning before Fries interrupted his thoughts.

"Not leaving you behind again." Turning away, Fries continued to

walk.

"I-I was talking with-"

"You can talk to him later. Come on."

Then they turn and leave the path. Not wanting to make the family any more upset than they were, he waited for a few moments before he spent the rest of his time catching up, his mind slipping beneath the windows of each abandoned building; all in search for crumbs of answers.

Yet, he couldn't help but feel himself realizing just how immature he had become. He scared his sister-in-law straight into a breakdown, caused a teammate to snap unexpectedly, and made two of his best friends slip into the sea of memories he desperately tried to escape.

If he wanted answers, he had to do it right.

Firey doesn't catch Gelatin's eye once he arrives near the lab. Instead, there were already a multitude of familiar faces present; Woody was staring at the sky, his hands covering the sight of his mouth so nobody could catch a glimpse of his scar. Bomby had seemingly woken up from a nap, with Nickel quietly leading him towards the group, a melancholic smile keeping his lover from worrying too much. Freesmart congregated near the steps of the lab, and his eyes soon came across-

"Leafy.." He finds the name slipping from his tongue, a gentle lull to his voice as he saw his girlfriend. With a soft smile, the metallic leaf would take him by the hands, letting their souls twirl amongst one another within the gentle winds of the evening.

"How'd it go?" She asks, her thumbs caressing the back of his hands with loving movements. Firey's smile faltered, his eyes darting around the atmosphere in shame.

"I- uh... I think I have a lot to learn here."

"Did something happen?"

"A lot did. I'm still- eager to help, but maybe I should try and go at it

in a different way..?"

When she hears this, Leafy couldn't help but give him a saddened smile. Then she kisses him on his cheek, her arm wrapping around him tenderly.

"Well," She spoke quietly. "We can work on that- together."

It's a similar response to the one he got this morning, when he suggested that they gather everyone up on behalf of the scientist's request. Only this time, her eyes seemed much sadder than before, at the dejection from Firey's tone. What more could be said between them?

With a sigh, Firey would hold Leafy close, his eyes soon whisking towards the entrance of Golfball's lab. The quiet conversations end with a flourish, as the familiar sight of the sports balls suddenly made their way into view, stepping up from the final stairs and making their way towards the center of the group.

Golfball was the first to speak. Well- she usually was. As her eyes began to adjust to the crowd around her, she came to realize that it had been ages since they had last gathered this way... at least... before everything. For a moment, the others swore that they caught a glimpse of a tear at the corner of her eye, but she cleared her throat, adjusting her glasses silently.

"Thank you all for coming, especially on such short notice." She began, looking around. "I'm surprised to see how many of you came."

"Especially considering how we only told a few of you." Tennis Ball chimed in, glancing down at his lover with a hopeful tone. Finishing each other's sentences was nothing new- in fact, it was one of the many qualities that made their relationship as special as it was. He hoped that it would, at least, get a mere reaction from her.

Instead, she barely gave a passing glance, continuing to address their colleagues.

"It has come to our attention that we have all been suffering with a decline in our sleeping habits. There's many reasons as to why that is-

my hypotheses are more than enough to explain it- but I've decided that enough is enough. There has got to be a solution to all of this!"

"I don't think 'solution' is a good way to put it, GB..." Robot Flower buzzed in, her head tilting down at the smaller sports ball. This only earned a glare from GB, as she stomped in front of her, continuing.

"Thankfully, I've been spending more time in my underground laboratory- all that inspiration, creation, and innovation- it encouraged me to create something that can help us get the rest we need, all to prevent my brain from eating itself out of exhaustion, of course."

"Oh my pump." Basketball uttered. "GB- could you try and be a little serious here?"

"Sure, once you become an actual scientist- like me."

"HEY!"

"Oh for petals sake, quit yapping and tell us what you made already!" Flower shouted, her arms crossing over her chest. "I need a way to get my beauty sleep back before my petals start ROTTING!"

The intimidating tone of Flower's voice made Tennis Ball step in between the two, a nervous smile plastered on his face. "O-Of course, of course- GB?"

In return, Golfball rolled her eyes. "After the recovery, I made my way through some of the abandoned pharmacies in the city. While some medicines were beyond their expiration date, I was able to reverse-engineer their chemical ingredients to focus on an aliment to our troubles!"

"While you all are recovering and speaking with one another, we decided that a little medicine wouldn't hurt, especially to try and help the night terrors that we get every so often." Tennis Ball finished her sentence, the corners of his mouth lifting into a small smile as Golfball picked up where he had left off, silently picking up a purple container, and lifting it into the air.

"Behold- my latest creation, a way to get ourselves back on track- ZELATONIN!"

Standing there, the scientist waits for the wondrous sound of her impressed colleagues. But when silence fills the air around her, she blinked, lowering the container with puckered lips. Every object around her stared back in utter confusion. She could make out dread and unease in some of their eyes, while others were too dumbfounded to even speak.

Except for Ice Cube, her words breaking past her mind without a second thought. "Zela-wha?"

"Zelatonin! A combination of a medication aimed to treat PTSD and night terrors, and melatonin itself!" Golfball holds out the bottle, slowly turning to let their eyes scan the contents in her hold. "It took me many sleepless nights to find the perfect combination in such a tiny little pill- but its effects are foolproof!"

"And how do you know that?" Book raised her hand, her concern beginning to get the best of her. "Is it safe?"

Tennis Ball quickly chimed in. "Of course- our test runs showed nothing but positive results, after all."

"Precisely- our tests suggest a 93.571 percent success rate, with little to no troubles noted!"

Even with this, the unease still hung over everyone's heads. With a raise of her hand, Needle would let Golfball give her a nod, assuring her that she had the floor to speak. "Are there any side effects..?"

"Well- the first few nights could have a range of results. But every medication needs time to settle in- and this has already worked like a charm." Nodding, Golfball walked over towards Basketball, nudging at the bag by her side. Multiple bottles of Zelatonin could be seen from its opening, as she had made just enough for the entirety of the crew.

"With our research, your chances of getting a good night's rest spike from 4.315 percent, to a whopping 91.736 percent." Golfball

formulated, her glasses shining from the reflection of the sunset. "This could hopefully give everyone a chance to progress with their healing processes- wherever that may be."

The scientific jargon, although confusing, was enough to help the others loosen up towards Golfball. Usually they wouldn't pay any mind to the endless statistics that were calculated from her brain, but when it came to the medication that could potentially return them to a state of normalcy, the numbers served as mere comfort to them.

Golfball demanded that both Basketball and Robot Flower helped with the distribution of the medicine.

"Oh, before we do, we better clear the air between you two," says Robot Flower. Nearby eyes fall upon the two and quiet snickers fill the air as Basketball gave the shorter scientist a nudge. "Maybe if all of Yoyle City puts their minds together, we can actually get along and appreciate our scientific endeavors."

"You'll probably have to spend weeks hitting the books then." Golfball utters with clenched teeth.

"I've got my knowledge on machinery, if that's what it takes." Basketball replied with a hint of clandestine humor.

Oh, the fun these two had within each other's presence.

"Say," She begins. "Don't you have a rat to take care of?"

Basketball took a deep breath, not bothering to turn as she opened the bag of Zelatonin. "At least I care about shapes." She murmured, smiling as Robot Flower would carry the bag. The response made Golfball's eye twitch with anger- yet, she stepped back, glaring daggers at the orange sports ball.

The anger didn't last too long. Even as she watched the others carefully taking the bottle into their own hands, she would quietly adjust her glasses with a gentle sigh.

How did she know that this would work? She spent all of that time alone- no way in hell would she try to ask anyone for help.

So what if the side effects hit her hard. So what if she started hallucinating, seeing a gaping wound on her forehead with Pin's damned smile behind her.

It was all in the name of science.

She at least felt lighter, quietly turning towards Tennis Ball with a weakened smile. There wouldn't be a chance in hell for him to find out how she tested this; usually, she was the one screaming for a test subject. But she had been so dejected by everything, too exhausted by living itself, that frankly, she didn't care anymore.

Tennis Ball walked towards her, a small smile on his face. "You okay..?" He asked.

Golfball gave him a slight 'shrug'. "I've been better."

"Well, do you think these pills could help?"

"Oh, TRUST ME. I know they will." Seeing that familiar grin on Golfball's face was enough to fill Tennis Ball's heart with comfort. Blush bloomed on his face, catching her eyes as she looked up, suddenly realizing everything she had missed.

Or, well- everything she had forgotten. Repressed.

And the moment she could feel a slight blush forming, she cleared her throat. "Tennis Ball-"

"Tag! Grassy's it!"

Suddenly, the sound of children's laughter made the two break away. Looking up, they were rather surprised to see both Grassy and Rocky, scampering into the scene as one tapped the other. Seems like they were in the middle of an intense game of tag, leading them to find their way back to them all.

What surprised Golfball the most, was the small smile that glowed from Rocky's face. The scar on his forehead had hit her like a bag of bricks- thinking he would never be able to recover from the incident- but the tiny smile was enough to show that he had found some solace amongst this place.

That being, a friend.

Immediately, Rocky would notice both Golfball and Tennis Ball, quickly running towards them. The larger scientist chuckled softly as the tiny rock would hide behind him, peeking out to see Grassy searching for him.

"Grassy knows you're there!" The bundle of grass giggled, skipping through the crowd as they received their medicine. It was enough to catch Robot Flower's eye, handing Woody a bottle. She began to turn, but the balsa slice had reached for her, whispering a question he had- so Basketball quickly stepped in to check on the smaller one.

"Hey there." She chuckled, watching as Grassy stopped in his tracks, turning to give her an excited wave.

"Hi ma-.. Mmh.." Grassy shook his head, flapping his hands slightly before he got the words together, looking back up towards her. "-Basketball!"

Smiling, she gave his blades a gentle ruffle, making the ball of grass giggle. "Are you okay? I see you're growing fond of running off from Snowball..."

"Grassy likes his funny doings!"

"Do they involve running off from him?"

"Yeah!"

"Don't you think they're becoming- too much..?"

"Nope! Grassy thinks his funny doings are a-ok!" He looked up. "But Rocky wanted to come home- so Grassy brought him home! But Rocky and Grassy started playing tag on the way!"

Turning, Basketball caught a glimpse of the other smaller object, somewhat moving in between Golfball and Tennis Ball. Although there was a tired look in his eyes, a peaceful smile was on his face, letting himself hide in the comfort of Tennis Ball's fuzz.

"Seems like he's had a fun day." She smiled, turning back towards Grassy. "Here- would you like to help us give everyone their medicine?"

"Sure! Grassy's ALWAYS helpful!"

Basketball wastes no time. Immediately, she gives Grassy as many bottles as he can carry, giggling quietly as he placed some on the top of his head. Robot Flower soon walked over, helping the kid with what he could, picking up any bottles that rolled from his hold.

"Remember," the robot spoke, "Everyone gets one bottle. Okay?"

With an eager nod, Grassy was off. Now having more hands for the job, the three didn't take long to distribute the medicine towards the others in the group, with Grassy happily raising a bottle towards Bubble.

"Here!" He exclaimed, a smile on his face. For a moment, Bubble had zoned out- staring into dead air with an intense glare, before the sound of his voice made her jump. She looked to her side, but quickly caught sight of the little object, carefully taking the bottle into her own hands.

"Thank you.." Was all she could muster, quietly glancing back at her team- each of them getting their medicine from Basketball. Grassy nodded, happily rocking on his feet.

"One day, Grassy's gonna be a hero and protect everyone he loves- just like Bubble!"

The words pierced through Bubble's flesh like a sword, draining her from any ounce of strength she had. She flinched, feeling weak and broken with an innocent gaze locked onto her own. Phantom pains return to the poor woman, prickling at the scars that tainted every mere inch of her arms. There's a long pause, with Grassy eagerly watching her, a hopeful aura shimmering in his eyes.

Then, Bubble forced a grin, a weakened chuckle coming from her as she clutched the medicine bottle weakly. The tension, although there, slowly melted as she glanced back down at the smaller object.

"Oh, Grassy," she whispered, weakly taking the medicine from his hands. "You're quoite imaginative.."

"Grassy loves imagining!"

Pain.

Pain.

All I can feel. All I know.

Pain.

Can't describe it. Can't say it. Can't.

Blood. My blood. It runs. It goes down.

Endless.

Quiet.

...Voice...?

"Tree...?"

Wait...

"Where did you go..?"

Is... that...

"Please... I-if you can hear me... I..."

Am I...

"..Everything stays..."

Bottle...

"Right where you left it..."

Everything.. Stays...

"But it still changes... ever so slightly.."

Daily.. and.. Nightly...

"In.. little, ways..."

No..

Come.. back...

Please..

I'm right.. Here..

Please...

Where.. everything.. stays...

With a frown, Bottle would look at the paper in her hands, her eyes moving through the different areas that were listed in Yoyle City. A tear ran down her cheek as she lifted her pen, silently crossing "The Woods" off of it.

I'm not being the mentally ill allegations (we struggle sometimes!)

good mornin, who doesn't love a weekend release?? I sure do. (also, spring break hell yeah)

I was like "why are chapters taking forever to write" and then I realized that book 1 was just 2k-4k words each chapter. Here, its between 6-10k, with this chapter being 11k. ADHD, I tell you.

also no suffering... but erm. i mean it when i say it goes down next chapter. well-- the next three chapters. sorry!

anyways byeeeeee!!

~ice

Tag, You're It!

⚠**TW: GORE**. Please read with caution.⚠

"So. What do you have in store?"

"Well, uh... we figured that you were in need of some help around here. We can only imagine how much of a handful it can be to try and care for everyone in the city- as well as Rocky himself..."

"Uh-huh. Anything else?"

"Both of us wan- wait, what do you mean anything else?"

Balloony's eyes followed Golfball across the room, watching her place an empty beaker down. "Oh please. I'm not stupid- I can see what you both are trying to do."

"What, trying to help you with babyzitting?" Hovering beside his close companion, Cloudy raised an eyebrow towards the smaller scientist. "We aren't joking, Golfball- we really want to-"

Golfball quickly interrupted him. "I am perfectly capable of watching over him."

"Then why did Bazketball tell us that-"

"Basketball has a serious issue of not minding her own business. Poor girl- first she can't be a scientist, now this?" The scientist's eyes were alert, but besides the annoyance that had filled them, they had lost the melancholy that the two men captured mere moments before.

In fact, her eyes were now locked onto them with a stinging bitterness.

The two would exchange nervous glances, trying to reassure themselves that she wasn't being too serious with them. Golfball would let out a halfhearted chuckle, grabbing a pair of pliers and poising them towards the balloon.

"You two haven't met the kid anyways. What makes you think you can be fitting babysitters- if I dared to consider it?"

Hesitantly, Balloony would lower the pliers from her hold. "Actually- both of us had a chance to speak to him! Albeit, we were still stuck in the Locker of Losers- but still!"

"Speaking with him?" Questioned Golfball. "I find that hard to believe."

"We did! He didn't zay much- but we always heard him!" Cloudy couldn't help but raise his tone, frustrated by her snide remark towards the two.

"And when did Rocky ever go near the TLC?"

"I dunno." Balloony crossed his arms. "Maybe that should be something to consider about yourself. Did you know anything about Rocky before everything happened?"

Even in her deadened, snarky state, his words spark a painful realization through Golfball. Reminding her of how things really were before it all crumbled into pieces. And how disdainful the woman could be.

Her eyes broke away from the two, memories beginning to flicker back in her mind. Usually, Tennis Ball was the one who took Rocky under his wing- he was the one who let Rocky sit on the top of him, watching quietly as they both ventured forth in their scientific endeavors. There were those moments where the angered woman would snap at him, demanding that he stop his vomiting or step away from their newly built inventions.

A migraine quickly began to strike, yet she shut her eyes. Rocky was always with the two of them- no matter what they did or where they ran off to, he would always skitter after them, an endless curiosity in

his eyes. Golfball should have seen this as an opportunity to at least teach the kid what she knew-

But she didn't care.

No, no she cared. She did! Sure, he was strange- that made their lives a little brighter in the city!

She didn't care.

She CARED. TB cared, and so did she, even if she had a different way of showing it. The three were a trio-

She didn't care.

She let him wander. Wander aimlessly through the city.

And because of her carelessness, not only did she never know what he enjoyed doing, but she got him killed.

"You know, it doesn't hurt to ask for help every once in a while." Balloony said in a hushed tone. "We see how much you all are doing; the least we could do is take something off of your hands- something that isn't science, of course."

Golfball blinks, silently adjusting her glasses as she wonders if he was saying that so she could break, so she could thank them and let herself fall into the grasp of vulnerability once more.

Nope. Not this time. Not ever again.

Before Balloony could try and speak once more, the familiar tennis ball appeared in the doorway of the lab. He remembered who he was ever since the day he overheard his frantic explanation about a missing friend- and the reveal of the horrors that took place outside.

Thankfully, Basketball had gotten her cousin used to the names of the former TLC-er's in the city. So when he caught sight of the three before him, Tennis Ball gave them a smile, forcing the sleepiness back into the deepest crevices of his soul.

"Hey Balloony. Hey Cloudy." He greeted, approaching the three. "Ready to help us with the little guy?"

The words immediately made Golfball snapback, swirling towards him in the blink of an eye. "Excuse me?"

"Of courze! It'z been weekz zince we lazt zaw him- we want to zay hello!" Cloudy smiled, making his way towards the larger scientist. Golfball was stuttering in dismay, thrown off the path that she had fixed herself onto.

When the HELL did she agree to this?!

As if on cue, Balloony asked something similar. "Are you sure you're fine with us helping? We know how close you both are to little one..."

"You two are doing us a big favor here- trust me, we're more than happy to let you help." Tennis Ball sighed out in a way that, despite the doubtfulness of his tone, seemed totally believable. Angered, Golfball would bounce from her seat, quickly stomping towards her boyfr-

LAB PARTNER. Lab partner.

Her efforts were immediately halted as he carefully pressed against her, stopping her from colliding against him.

"TENNIS BALL!" The shorter scientist shouted, immediately buzzing on into her angered tirades. Sighing, Tennis Ball would turn towards the two, tilting his head towards the doorway.

"He could still be sleeping- don't hesitate to call us over if something comes up!" he exclaimed, wincing as Golfball yelled and thrashed against him. The two men watched as he grunted, silently dragging her back into the lab as she continued her angered tirades, before the air around them fell quiet once more.

Well, only for a few seconds. A soft clink made Cloudy turn around, his eyes coming in contact with Robot Flower, who carried capped beakers with swirling liquids inside of them. He would have spoken out- but she did the honors herself.

"Get used to it," she buzzed. "There's four of us working here."

"Working? On what?" Balloony asked.

Robot Flower couldn't help but chuckle. "Eh- Golfball would probably kill me if I mentioned it- but you all deserve to know. We're focusing on building more recovery centers for the city. Only having one wouldn't be such a bright idea, especially with everyone being released from the TLC."

When she adjusted the beakers in her arms, she could feel their attention fixed onto her. "I didn't think she'd let anyone else in her lab.." Balloony conceded.

"I wasn't going to be," she pointed out. "But Basketball is Tennis Ball's cousin- she wanted to help, as did I. And I don't think GB's that dull to turn away a robot from helping."

"And what about Basketball?"

"Hates her. She's only tolerating her for TB's sake."

"Doesn't seem like she's taking TB into any consideration here." Balloony uttered, shaking his head. Robot Flower couldn't help but snicker, cleaning the table as she prepared to work.

"Trust me," she said. "Those two are inseparable. But with everything that happened- it made GB close herself off even more. And I can't blame her for that."

Hearing this, Cloudy would frown. "Zhe zhould at leazt give him a chanze.."

"Oh, if only it were that easy. GB's still learning about coping with everything that happened." Robot Flower looked up.

"On top of that... she's still learning how to love."

"Wha? A dragon? Grassy is here to protect!"

Quickly leaping from puddle to puddle, the bundle of grass would giggle as rain water splashed on himself. The sensation merely tickled him, as his body took in the water that came in contact with his blades.

Everyone had gotten to know Grassy during their time in the TLC. How could they not? He was an excitable object, his imagination and strong-will keeping them from losing their minds. He didn't understand a thing anyone said when they ranted to him- but hey! He was...there.

And that familiar smile was enough to ease the damned tension within that metal prison.

Continuing to bounce between the puddles of rain, he watched as the ripples would warp his reflection, before settling back with a clear view. He knew Basketball asked for him to wear the rain boots that she had found in an abandoned shop- but Grassy liked the rain and mud!

Snowball said it himself- he's gotta stand up for himself!

Or was it Dad..?

....Dad?

Coming to a stop, Grassy would take a seat, the sudden thought bringing a cloud of realization into his soul, its droplets washing away his imaginative game and seeping him back to reality.

Dad... could he... call Blocky his dad..?

That means he could call Basketball his mom.. and such...

...But would they be okay with that..? Grassy didn't want to lose the awesome friends he had gotten to meet in the Tiny Loser ch-..chaa...

...Chaam..burr..?

He pouted. This would have to be something he asks them later.

Besides, everyone was busy. Robot Flower was working with Uncl- Tennis Ball. Blocky and Snowball were busy helping their friends fix up their new homes. Rocky was taking a nap- from what Basketball had told him, he had a very bad headache that didn't let him sleep- and she was helping Golfball with that, from what he remembered.

So now, here he was! Playing quite the serious game of Knights. The hopscotch path was washed away from the rain, and the hula hoop he had got snapped in two (thanks Snowball), so it was up to him and his imagination to pass the time he had to himself.

Grassy stepped out from the puddle, flapping his arms and shaking himself off from any rainwater that had gotten onto him. His blades wriggled and curled, having taken in some form of water before he wandered off, coming up with different games he could play.

I could hear someone from a distance. You'd think everyone would be inside from the rainstorm- but I guess not.

There was a tiny closet that held a few garden tools in one of the hushed crevices of the garden. I didn't see it before- but the voice told me that it still had enough for me to use.

'Exactly! You've got a wide array of tools here- unless you want to stick with that trowel of yours, feel free to sift through what we have!'

"And where did this come from..?"

'It's been here for a while. Heh- Woody took the trowel back when Pin and I were still starting off! Let me tell you- Pin was pathetic. She didn't seem to mind at all- oh, but I MADE her. It was HER tool after all!'

Pin...

I carefully looked through the small closet, hesitantly pulling the pitchfork from the corner. Brushing my hands against the handle, I feel every crevice and splinter on its side, shivering at the thought of having to use this- for anything else.

The noise continues. I looked up, thinking that Tree was the one who was trying to call for help again.

To her, it was annoying. To me... I just wanted to try and comfort him, as best as I could. She wouldn't let me- but I always tried.

He never took it well though.

I make my way to the garden, stepping over the glowing yoylite with the pitchfork still in hand, as my eyes soon fall upon him. His singular eye would usually meet with mine whenever I stopped by, but today, it was fixed on the ground, a haze darkening the familiar green tint of his pupil.

For a moment, I thought he was dead. Then I capture his chest, slowly, but surely, rising and falling with every raspy breath he took.

'Looks like someone finally decided to give in...'

"The noise isn't coming from here."

'Better keep looking then~'

A shiver goes through my body. Looking back, I place the pitchfork down with the trowel, before I make my way down the path, trying to figure out where the noise was coming from.

My eyes soon capture green. And my heart drops.

'Hah. Would you look at that...'

"No- NO. We can't- that-"

'USE YOUR EYES, WOMAN! My garden is on the line here. We need as many plants as we can GET.'

"HE'S JUST A KID!"

'And so was Rocky. But you already knew that.'

"...."

'Besides- my garden could use more.. oh, I dunno.. Grass...'

"Please, I-I can get- someone else- I can try to-"

'Hmm, would be a shame if... I got a special someone instead... I may not get my grass- but I'm sure your little friend- your lover- would do just fine..'

No.

No.

No, please, I...

"...What's the plan."

'Plan? Cmon'- let's switch things up. Why don't we have a little field day- just the three of us..?'

Yoyle City bloomed into the gentle melody of spring, the comforting chill of the winds clashing with the petrified aura of those who resided in their newly-claimed houses. Clouds would laze across the sky, blocking the sun every now and then as they carried the promise of rain within their cotton-like structures.

The city was awake. Hushed, yet awake- as some ventured around, mindlessly exploring the abandoned structures, while some stayed beside their friends, passing the time with mindless conversations. Everyone seemed to be busy,

Except for a familiar coin, who sat at his desk, silently pouring his heart into every word that scratched onto the page. The faint sound of chatter and laughter didn't take his attention away, as the open window helped bring some of that fresh spring air into his room.

The sound of the door creaking open made him blink, his train of thought stopping at the sentence he had written down. Turning, his gaze came across Leafy, who was peeking in to check on their new roomie.

"How are you holding up?" she asked.

"Oh- uh, I'm doing okay," the coin answered, silently shaking himself out of his thoughts as he gave her a thumbs up.

"Did Firey give you the meds?"

"Psh, thankfully. Almost had to slap him because he wouldn't stop joking around!"

"Oh my tree," Leafy rolled her eyes, rubbing her creased forehead with a sigh. "Well. I guess that's another thing I have to bring up."

Coiny blinked at the sentence, before raising an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"It's... a really long story. Needless to say, I'm trying to help him empathize with everyone here."

"Firey? Being empathetic?! Man, the day that comes to be will be the day the world ends, I'm telling you now."

Coiny chuckled, looking away as he could feel Leafy's annoyed stare digging holes into his head. "Really, Coiny." A tense silence hung between the two, though it didn't last long, as Leafy's look quickly melted into a gentle smile, with the two sharing a laugh at the topic. Seeing how happy he was (this being the first time he's smiled in days), Leafy would walk over, giving him a hug that he would carefully accept.

"You sure you don't need anything else?"

"I'm sure, Leafy. Letting me stay with the two of you- it's more than enough."

"That's what friends are for, silly." Leafy gave him a pat on the back, carefully breaking away from the hug. "Now- I'll leave you to it. I left Firey in charge of dinner for today, while I go and get some things for the place. I swear- our snacks are gone in the blink of an eye..."

"Leaving him in charge of DINNER? Please, grab a fire extinguisher and some takeout while you're at it."

The lemon leaf laughed as Coiny dramatically threw an arm over his head, leaning back into his seat. "Coiny, he took his yoyleberry- he'll be just fine."

"Suuuure," the coin snickered, lifting his head. "And if the kitchen blows up, I won't lift a finger to fix it!"

"I'll make you if you keep that attitude."

"Haha- uh.."

"...Anyways! I'll be back before you know it. Want any snacks so we can stock up on them?" Leafy asked, that kind smile returning to her face.

Hesitantly, Coiny would wave her away. "Snacks?! W-What snacks- I'm a-ok..."

"....Really."

"...some chips, please."

"Knew it! I'll grab some extra- hopefully you don't scarf them down so fast."

"Tell that to Firey! He's the reason why we keep running out!"

"Whatever. See you for dinner, coin-creature!" And with a quick wave, Leafy would leave the room, gently closing the door behind her.

For Mint's sake, she was so kind. But, for Mint's sake- she was terrifying sometimes.

Shaking his head, Coiny would glance back, noticing the closet that was filled to the brim with the snacks that Firey and Leafy would bring. He was relieved that they hadn't noticed it yet- he already felt awful for taking their groceries- but it had to be done.

They'd immediately notice something if he was taking too much food.

He sighed, scanning at the words that were left trailing on the page he had worked on. He picked up his pencil, easily getting back into the letter he was working on.

On the corner of the desk stood the bottle of Zelatonin. Like he mentioned, Firey had brought him some, as he wasn't feeling great when they tried to get him to go. Of course, Firey tried to give him a slap- but he was quick to stop him.

Even with Leafy's gentle words of encouragement, Coiny didn't have the strength to try and leave the house.

Little did she know what he had done.

Days had passed since Pin's recovery. Not a singular soul knew of what he had done- thankfully, the two scientists had gotten a house to reside in while they weren't cooped up in their lab- and he couldn't risk anyone finding out.

He couldn't even risk telling Firey. Sure, he was murdered first and had no idea what it all boiled down to be- he almost wondered if he was dealing with that fear, just like the others were. Usually, he heard Firey consoling Leafy through her own night terrors, it was never the other way around.

Blinking, Coiny would slowly place the pencil down, his vision beginning to grow blurry. He decided to give the Zelatonin a try once he had woken up, hoping that it'd help him with the depression that left him feeling like a rotten banana peel.

Instead, it had made the world around him come to a halt. His eyes grew too heavy for him to fight against, his body slumping onto the

flat surface below. He knew it wasn't a good time to get some rest, but he had grown so tired...

He just needed... some sleep...

"Why?! Why did you bring me back?! Don't you know what's going to happen now?!"

Please, listen to me!

"Everyone was recovered Pin. EVERYONE. That should have included you- and now you're getting mad at ME?!"

"I DIDN'T DESERVE TO BE RECOVERED! You, out of ALL PEOPLE, should have KNOWN THAT!"

I still remember.

"Trust me, I DO."

Have fun in hell. I still remember it ALL.

"Me recovering you isn't a sign of my forgiveness..."

I'm angry. Devastated. How COULD YOU?!

"...But that doesn't mean I should sit back and forget EVERYTHING we had together!"

Can you PLEASE JUST-...

Wait...

Why are your eyes turning... red...

"If that was true, you would have known that staying dead was BETTER!"

I-Is that- what are those red-.. veins...? Your arms, they're growing veins-roots..?!

Pin- what- what is this, I-

"And leaving you behind from living once more wasn't?!"

No, ask her- come on, ASK HER!

"Coiny- if the others find out about this..."

Not the hands, NO-

The lab is turning red- the sky- the garden- no no, come on- don't-

....Who is that behind you...

Pin.. PIN-

"...we're done for."

PIN!

"I'm done for. All because of..."

The reddened figure stood behind her, their glowing pupils staring back at- it's behind her- crawling up her- the veins, no, it-

It suddenly looked up, cracking as it forced Pin's head to face-

"Me."

"PIN!!"

A strangled cry comes from Coiny's throat. Nobody is there to help him.

His body jerked upwards, strained yells shooting through his throat. His heart raced deep within his chest, and although these few seconds felt like grueling hours, the sound of his own panting filled his mind, the familiar room quickly fading into view.

Another dream.

He had lost count of the reoccurring dreams he's had with Pin. Night after night, or, well, in every instance he fell asleep, his mind would travel back to the area where the two had last met; that lab, the recovery center behind Pin, as she was mere inches away from him.

It was all the same. The words they had exchanged to each other. The dread of letting her go. The feeling of his heart breaking into two.

But the more he experienced it, the more it began to change. The lab starts to grow into a garden. Hands sprouting from the tiled floors. The walls melting into a red sky, and...

...That thing.

That... red thing... an abomination? A figure...

At first, it peeked over her shoulder. Then, with every dream he had, it would grow out of its own shell, revealing bits of itself to the coin as the environment grew more demented.

....Hopefully the zelatonin could stop it. Everyone did mention that there were a few side effects...

Coiny could hear the laughter from the open window, being carried by the winds from the faint promise of spring.

Nobody would notice him- hopefully. They already didn't; Coiny was beyond saving when they saw his recovery, realizing that the woman he had held so near and dear to his heart was responsible for the carnage that ensued. Maybe the dreams were a sign of that slipping stability.

If this was what kept him from being pointed out- so be it. Let them see him as someone crazy.

For a while, he stares at the words that were scribbled across the page. Then, with a swift movement, he grabs the pencil once more, slowly beginning to pour the contents of his aching heart onto the page, with the sounds of the city keeping him company.

From the bottom of his rooted heart, Grassy decides to trust me.

I know this because as soon as he is finished playing, he springs into my arms, his laughter filling the dreaded void around me. She was watching- I had to remind myself of that.

Grassy's quiet laughs would take that thought away. For a moment, it felt like she had vanished; it was just me and him, both playing together in the hushed vastness of the woods. I can see why the others enjoyed his presence; he really was a ray of sunshine.

Now we are here. And for a moment, it feels like nothing had ever happened to us- to me.

But I'm too exhausted to begin. From the scars, the voice, and Grassy's warmth from the way he was cradled to my chest, it brings a sense of familiarity. Safety, even. I realize how long it has been since I've felt this way; a bond that carries the blissful ignorance of the past, free from the crushing weight of unknown terrors.

It was a friend I needed. A new friend; one that eased my fears and reminded me that everything will be okay.

Carefully, he wriggled around before looking up to face me. "Grassy like playing hide-n-seek!"

"It's a fun game," I whisper, smiling as my hand brushes against his blades. He giggles, a few strands wrapping around my finger.

"Super fun! What other games can Grassy play?"

I await her response. She usually told me what to do next, where to go, and what to try. Now, the only thing that greeted me was my own silence.

And it feels like Grassy could notice too. His head tilted curiously, while my eyes were fixed onto dead air. I could see his mouth forming my name, before I shook my head.

"Well," I said. "What kind of games does Grassy like?"

The little guy's face glowed with excitement. "Grassy likes a lot of games! Robot Flower taught Grassy how to play 'Robot Says', and Basketball taught Grassy how to play hop-... uh... hopss...-"

"Hopscotch?"

"Yeah!"

I couldn't stop myself from asking. "What about Blocky? Did he teach you any games?"

"Blocky taught Grassy how to play four square! And hot potato!"

Was this the same Blocky that everyone knew?

"Grassy likes to see Blocky's Funny Doings, too. One day, Grassy will have his own Funny Doings! Blocky said so himself!"

"Well," I smile. A genuine one, at that. "I wanna try some funny doings for Blocky, but... I don't know how. I need some help! Do you think you could help me with it?

"Sure! Grassy loves funny doings! Blocky will be proud of Grassy if he does it!" He practically bounces with joy in my arms, as I carefully lower him back to the ground. Before I can pull away, he quickly grabs my hands, giving them an excited shake with the biggest smile you could ever imagine.

My heart melted. I knew I couldn't.

...She wasn't.. saying anything.

I should try. Try before she does.

But I need to keep it low.

Taking a deep breath, I caressed his head, my fingers brushing in between the blades. "Before we do that- I think we should play one more game."

"Really?" Grassy gasps. "What game should Grassy play?"

"How about a quick round of Tag! Once we're set- you can teach me your own funny doings!"

"YEAH!"

This could work. This- I can get him back home, and- I-

Doesn't matter what happens to me. I can get him back home.

"Okay." I clap my hands. "Why don't I be the first-"

"GRASSY'S IT!"

With that, he immediately pokes the side of my arm, soon running off. I flinched at first. Seems like he wanted to be careful with me, since he knew that I was recovered with everyone else.

A brief moment goes by, and I find myself alternating between walking and jogging, trying to listen to the sounds of his laughter and skittering footsteps. But then I realized that he was making his way into the deeper parts of the forest.

The parts where the garden laid to grow.

I'm fast. Maybe not as fast as Needle- still, I catch up to him. He's a lot smaller- surely enough, he's got that energy that has him sprinting ahead of me- but I clench my teeth, pushing myself to run after him.

I know I can do this- I know I can get him out of here.

Could I do it in time?

His laughter begins to swirl with every twist and turn I take. The trees before me start towering high into the sky, blocking the light from ever reaching these damned soils below. It knows what I am doing- it blocks the eyes of the world from seeing the sins I've committed.

I keep running. Everything grows unfamiliar- we're far from the city by now. Far from the garden.

The sudden darkness drowns my sight, and while I'm puzzling my way through the woods, I can hear his laughter dashing beside me.

No! I missed it! He was right there, I missed my chance! I should have reached out, to try and find him in the darkness; but this cost me my hope, doubt swirling into the mix and leaving nothing behind. My feet stumble awkwardly, trying to find my pace once more before I throw myself forwards, sprinting down the path.

I can hear his laughter. He's nearby, and I'm not letting my chance go to waste.

I find myself stopping in a blocked path, fallen trees blocking my way to get through. Grassy, who had somehow made it to the other side, playfully sticks his tongue out in my direction, flapping his hands in glee.

His strength was a rumor I never found myself believing. He was just a kid- a little object with little arms- there was no way he could have any ounce of strength within those nonexistent muscles. My eyes then fall onto the freshly-ripped roots of the trees, that same dirt staining Grassy's hands and chest.

For a moment, I feel a twinge of anger before I frantically reach for him through a small crevice. He inches closer and bounces back, teasing me. I glance around in a blind panic. That's when I see a clearing on my right side.

He staggered back with a smile once I made my way through. Yet, he quickly dashes away, his blades joyfully waving in the wind that brushed against them.

I wheezed, trying to catch my breath. All the doubt I had quickly turned into needles of fear, pricking and stabbing through me at the sudden familiarity of this path. A burst of adrenaline and I was off, shooting through the woods as the trees and flora became nothing more but a blurry haze.

The ground rises. My chest feels as if it's on fire. Every part of the woods

begins to morph into unfamiliarity, teasing me with sights that I thought I had once known, intermixed with foreign structures that I had yet to see.

Were we at the edge of the woods?

My frantic steps come to a gradual stop. The sounds of my gasping and coughing filled my mind while I took this chance to breathe, looking left and right to inspect the woods around me. Maybe it was the panic- or the exhaustion- but I couldn't tell what was real anymore.

It wasn't until I realized the absence of Grassy's laughter when I made a mad dash to the other side.

"GRASSY?!" I call, letting the forest hide me with its darkened embrace. "GRASSY?! WHERE ARE YOU?!"

We were far. Far from the others- a yell would sound like a mere wind gust to them. There was no way he could have made it back by now.

"GRASSY?!"

I search, desperately trying to find a sign of him. I swallow the ball of fire that burns at the center of my chest, steadying my breaths to keep an 'ear' out for any possible noise. A low rumble of thunder echoes through the rustling trees, and that's when I hear it.

A cry. His cry.

Nobody else was around in those woods besides us.

The feeling of fire vanishes when my legs immediately lunge forward, sprinting towards the source of the sound. I don't dare to stop from the sounds around me, no longer caring if that voice would try and stop me.

I keep running. I hear another cry, this time of a name. "Tree!"

Oh no.

His name becomes entangled within my closing throat.

Trees and bushes taunt me as I run, that familiar path becoming longer and longer. Flowers bloom all around me, but I fight it. I refuse to look at

them.

I had to get him out of here.

When I finally break into the familiar clearing, Grassy stands in the center, staring at the garden before him, terror muting the familiar sparkle in his eyes as his face was drained from all its color. It took me too long to realize that his eyes glossed over the budding plants and a few stray flowers before him, but instead, they were locked onto Tree.

Seems like Tree knew what was happening. Or, he thought he knew. For his eye was now widened in terror, blood gushing from his open trachea with panicked whines and gargles.

I held my hands out. There's no point in defending myself- no point in saying anything else. We knew where he was, now I needed to get him home.

"Oh no.." I find myself whispering, hesitantly stepping towards him. Grassy's blades perk up at the sound of my voice, and his head turns to face me, tears beginning to fill those terrified eyes of his.

"T-Tree- he's- everyone's looking for Tree..!" he cries out. There's a slight tremble to his voice, struggling to keep the fear at bay. It makes my eyes well with tears.

"Grassy, w-we have to get out of here-" I said. "It's not safe!"

"Who did th-this..?" Grassy hiccups, shakily stepping away. I reach out, but it causes him to flinch.

"No- I-..." My lips clamp shut. I shake my head, frantically trying to keep myself from saying anything more. I couldn't risk it now.

We're so close.

I took in silent gulps of air, letting the pre-storm winds sting at the aching inferno within me. It grounds me, keeping me from bursting into tears. Grassy's eyes swing from Tree to myself, and despite my wishes, his blades would droop in realization.

Shuddering and gagging, Tree would try and move himself from the

ground. A faint crack drew out a groan of pain, with blood spraying from the bone that now protruded from his side.

It splatters onto the dirt. Onto his face. And, to my horror- a few droplets splash onto Grassy.

He shakes his head, and I keep myself still, not wanting him to run.

"Grassy, listen to me," I pleaded. "I-.. I'm so sorry, I didn't- I-"

"G-Grassy wants to go home.." he whispers.

"I can get you home! I promise! I- I just-"

"Grassy won't tell anyone! Grassy can keep a secret!" He fails to keep the tears from crawling down his face, stumbling back. He trips over his feet, shakily scuttling towards the darkened entrance of the garden. "Grassy promises!"

I realized then, there was no going back. For me, at least. I let my hand outstretch in his direction, unable to stop my own voice from breaking as the tears shattered through my eyes.

"Okay- I trust you," I repeat, trying to keep him calm. "I trust you! Let me get you home- I promise, I trust you!"

My hands tremble as I fight the urge to grow any closer. He looks up at me, and for a second, I find that glint once more. It was too small to make out, but with every movement I made, it stayed.

He trusted me.

Quickly, I let him get back onto his feet. I shield his view from Tree, whispering a plea of forgiveness. Perhaps it was towards Tree. Or Grassy.

But as I come across the yoylite, my body freezes.

No.

'And where do you think you're going?' Her words make my blood run cold.

"I-..Listen, I-I can't DO THIS- I HAVE TO GET HIM OUT OF HERE!"

'You're going against my word...?'

"NO! I'LL FIND SOMEONE ELSE, JUST- I- I CAN'T DO IT!"

'Oh. I've heard that line before! No need to worry- I can always show you how!~'

My words suddenly cut into silence. The feeling of my limbs dissipate into nothing. My body is no longer my own, but instead, it becomes hers. With a turn of my head, I catch Grassy looking up at me, a frown of worry painted on his face.

"G-Grassy-" I stuttered. "-....I... think you're going to have to call your friends here- because we're about to have a sleepover!"

My voice. Foreign. Those words weren't mine.

I struggle to speak, her claws ensnaring my throat and keeping my warnings trapped from the world before them. Grassy could clearly tell that something was wrong, as his shivering body turned to face mine. My name left his mouth, once, twice...

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry you had to see this!" Yelling, I feel myself forcefully shoving him down. A pained cry followed the hard impact, causing him to curl beside Tree with waves of pain crashing against his shoulder.

He had hit one of Tree's growing roots, much to the object's dismay. I could see Tree's pupil trembling, his body twitching and shifting to try and help him get away.

No use.

It was no use.

She takes my steps back. All the while, I can hear his cries from behind me.

"P-Please take Grassy home!!"

We step away.

"Grassy- G-Grassy wants- B-Bas-"

Please forgive me.

"-..mom! MOM!! DAD!!"

With my hands grasping the pitchfork and trowel, she speaks.

"You know, these games were fun! But I think I know a game that you'd DIE for!"

All the anxiety and fear I had for Grassy's safety immediately condenses into a fixed terror towards the voice. I grit my teeth, straining myself to stop her movements from going any further.

Suddenly, I hear something whistling past the side of my head. We turned back, and in that instant, I had wished that those rumors had been nothing more than a lie.

With tears running down his face, Grassy was darting around the garden with rocks in his hold. His steps crushed any blooming plant below him, his eyes fixed on me as he lifted his arm.

The stone flew right towards our direction. Ducking, I let out a yelp when my body then lunged after him, my horrified expression curling into a smile.

"OH?! COME ON NOW- WE'RE NOT DONE PLAYING YET!" I hear myself scream, dodging every rock he pelts at us. With an angered shout, Grassy flung another stone, slicing against my arm with a hard blow.

At that moment, I feel myself going blank. Blood oozed down the open gash, my feet stumbling back from the angered kid before she lunged at him, causing him to shriek as the rocks fell from his grasp.

He narrowly avoided us. Avoid me. But as he lifts his head, a panicked daze clouds those bright eyes of his, as he frantically looks around.

Pain soared from the open wounds I had gained, the air slicing through my raw flesh like shards of glass, causing me to swallow back the urge to scream. Yet, I realized that her grip was retreating- my body was becoming my own once more.

With the remaining ounce of strength I have left, I turn to Grassy and scream. "GRASSY, RUN!"

His little head perks up.

Run.

I lose the feeling of my arms once more.

RUN.

He stumbles up, holding his shoulder as he begins to rush through the disheveled garden.

"Oh, GRASSY!~"

I screamed. But it's short lived- as my hands suddenly clutch the pitchfork close, my mouth opening to speak the words that I had feared:

"TAG- YOU'RE IT!"

Her cackling drowns my wail of defiance. With a heavy swing, my hand lets go of the pitchfork, watching it stab right through Grassy's back.

'Ugh- dammit Pen...' Blocky thought to himself as he carefully made his way around the house. He had promised to help both him and Eraser with some repairs that they needed in their newly chosen home, and there was no way he'd turn that offer down.

Besides- it was his friends. The more time they could spend together, the better.

He invited Snowball as extra muscle (in case there was anything that needed moving, or breaking), and from there, the four were reunited, their shenanigans quickly melting away the tension that crushed the city's atmosphere.

Unfortunately, their work came to a sweltering halt, due to the unexpected house guest that made its presence known.

Clenching the baseball bat in his hands, Blocky would squint, quickly glancing around the emptied room. Pen, Eraser, and Snowball stood in the doorway, watching the wooden block's careful movements while his eyes inspected the space he was in.

"Didja find it??" Pen whispered, clinging onto Eraser's arm. "Didja find the spider?!"

"Pen, It could've been a fly," Snowball murmured, leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed. "It's not a big deal."

"IT WAS A SPIDER! I-I SWEAR IT WAS!"

Eraser sighed, letting his hand caress the ink stick's back in a gentle motion. "Pen- it's okay. Look- Blocky's here to help, remember?"

"Y-..Yeah... Yeah, I-"

"GOTCHA!"

Blocky's sudden exclamation quickly made Pen stumble back, screaming in fear before tripping over his twitching feet. The air was quickly knocked out of him as his back slammed against the floor; he had no idea what had happened in the other room, yet the image of that damned spider filled his mind, causing him to use his shivering arms to hide him from the horrors of the insect.

Nearby, Blocky calmly swung the bat in his hands, carefully stepping by the two and looking down at his friend. "Crisis averted," he chuckled, placing a hand on his hip. "Any other pests you need me to squash?"

"Wha? Ah-.. d-did you kill it?" Pen asked, using his elbow to prop himself up from the ground.

"I have the guts to prove it- look!"

Swinging the bat towards him, Pen shrieked, his legs immediately kicking his body away from the three. Instantly, they began to laugh

at his actions before Eraser walked towards him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

There they were- being lovebirds as usual. Blocky couldn't help but chuckle at the sight, watching Eraser soothe his lover with a playful smile, and Pen covering his face out of embarrassment. Ever since he had met them, he knew that their connection was stronger than the rest, and, of course, he'd tease them endlessly for that fact alone.

Yet, as he watched his friends, pain stabbed through his back, causing him to tense up and clench the bat with a tight grip. It was enough to make him wince, an empty hiss sliding past his grit teeth while it permeated through his muscles.

Though, as quickly as it came, the pain immediately vanished, much to the wooden block's confusion. He turned his head, glancing from side to side before his thoughts settled in on the matter.

What the hell was that..?

He didn't hurt anything. He may be ripped compared to the others, but he hadn't done much of anything today. Was it the swing of the bat that made his muscles hurt?

Eraser noticed that Blocky's expression had fallen into a thousand yard stare, his eyes digging into the hidden layers of air before him with the subtle twitching of his hands. "..Blocky? What's wrong?"

His voice threw him off guard, his head shaking off the sudden change and staring back with a concerned look. Both Snowball and Pen had noticed the switch in his demeanor, staring at him with worry in their gazes.

"You blanked out there, dude," Eraser noted. "Is something up?"

Stunned, Blocky would blink before shaking his head with a low shudder. "..Nothing.. just... felt something weird."

"Wow, you can feel emotions?!" Pen joked, smirking playfully as he got himself back onto his feet. "I didn't know that was possible!"

Fortunately, his comment brought a smile back onto Blocky's face,

and he rolled his eyes as his friend's laughter washed the strange sensation clean from his soul.

"Oh, ha ha. You're so funny."

⚠

I run after Grassy, just in time for his legs to give in. He falls to his knees, his body slumping into my chest before I gut any remaining ounce of strength within him, yanking the trident out.

A scream. His scream. A sound that will forever stay lodged in the back of my mind.

Blood sprayed across my face once the pitchfork was dislodged from his back, but I cried out in anger, forcefully throwing it back into the garden. Bits and pieces of his flesh flung around us, with one chunk slapping me on the cheek, the smell crashing against me like a bag of bricks.

"G-GhAA-AhK.." Grassy's words drown in his own blood. He struggles to breathe, thrashing and wrenching violently as bloody bubbles form at the corners of his mouth.

Kids often adored the sight of bubbles. But seeing them form from his own blood made Grassy wail.

Although I try to stop it, my arm quickly grabs the trowel that was placed by our side. She hears my silent pleas, my wails for it to come to an end.

'Oh come on,' she scoffs. 'I heard that promise before- but it won't be the same. You're gonna have to learn how to finish the job!'

One swing, and the trowel stabbed deep into his chest, twisting it to drive it straight through his back.

I cry. Every remaining ounce of strength was siphoned away, leaving me

behind to stare at the nightmare before me. I hear Grassy wail out for his mom, but it fades away.

A stream of blood oozed down Grassy's quivering mouth. The trowel digs deeper into the center of his chest, my hand twisting violently in order to force it to his open back. The sound of mangling flesh fills the garden, harmonizing with Tree's desperate grunts, his pupil fixed on the bundle of grass before him.

He could not speak. But I could hear his screams from the core of his opened chest.

I cry out. At least, I try to. Nothing escapes my open mouth, but her giggling is enough to overpower Tree's hoarse wheezes of pain and panic, soon harmonizing with the coughs and gags that erupted from Grassy. The trowel slips from my hands, and the feeling in my limbs returns while I frantically cradle my arms around him.

The words that escape my mouth are foreign. The voice doesn't even comment; Grassy has to stutter out my name repeatedly before I can look down.

He was rolled onto his side, his body trembling violently as he curled around the gaping wound in his chest, revealing the still-forming innards of a growing child. Wincing, I yank the trowel out of his chest, a shower of blood blanketing over me. And then, his voice followed.

"M-momm..y.."

My heart sunk into the swelling abyss in my chest. Shivering, I took a better look at the damage that I had done.

His lungs swelled and shrunk rapidly, as he struggled to keep himself composed with the blood that was flooding them. His heart pulsated rapidly, the arteries and muscles tensing and twitching with every shift that he made.

I then noticed the fragments of his ribcage, scattered on my lap and in his open chest. Jagged edges of the bone pierced through his organs, squirting blood from its open wounds.

A whine would crack through every now and then, and with the floor now

painted red, I realized how he was now beyond saving.

I know she could hear that. She can hear it all. I crouch down, my eyes helplessly frozen onto the sight of his wound. When his hand shakily reaches for the sky, I quickly clutch it, desperately holding on like a kite. For a moment, it felt as if I were the one who was dying, the blood staining my arms and chest as my throat began to close.

"I-..It hurts..." he whines.

"I know, I know," I responded.

"Grassy... Grassy's scared..." he choked through a mouthful of blood.

" I..." I clenched my teeth, shakily adjusting him so his head rested against my chest. I make careful work of caressing his blades, which wriggled and flinched ever so weakly underneath my hand, twitching away from my fingers.

"L-Look- listen to me," I whisper, cradling him closely. "I'm gonna fix this- I- I promise- I'm going to help you.."

"Help..?" Grassy whispered.

"Yes! I promise- I-I'm going to-"

Grassy then cried out in pain, his body jolting violently as a sharp pain jolted through his body. My composure slips, my body shuddering with every sob as I hold his tiny hand in mine. With a whimper, his head shakily turned to face me, his eyes draining from the life they once had.

My name leaves his mouth in the form of a whimper.

"Yes..?"

"..Grassy wants.. m-mom.." He shudders, his voice scratchy and hoarse. "..Grassy wants h-his.. Dad.."

I had to bite my tongue in order to keep the sobbing down. "I'm so sorry.. I.."

"P-Please... mom.. d-dad.. .."

He was slipping away. Shakily, I tried to get up, but the voice forced my legs to the ground, planting me in to see what I had done.

She controlled me. Every part of me.

No matter what I could do.

There was no escape.

The yoylite glowed in the darkness of the garden. With it's aura, I watched helplessly as Grassy's eyes began to dim, his gaze lifting to the sky as his voice made its presence known.

"Mom..?"

I couldn't leave him like this.

"Dad.."

My hand reached for the trowel.

"..b-..brother.."

His eyes began to close.

"..Grassy's.. sleepy.."

I whisper one last apology to him. Before his final breath could escape, I pressed the trowel's edge to his throat, clenching the handle and swiping it to the side.

---

it's spring break and I am a little tired!

anyways. NEW CHAPTER! wow. and one that ISNT over 9k?! insane.

I think its time for a nap. someone from this chapter would agree,

methinks

ALSO TPOT 10?!?!? BANGER EPISODE. JNJ really gave us all THAT

ok, thats enough of me. See you guys in the next chapter (we go lower)

-ice

Sincerely,

Dear Pin,

I have to keep reminding myself about your absence from the city. Every time I wake up, I'm reaching for you, but you're not there- and my heart breaks all over again.

~~*I've been having more dreams about you.*~~

Who knew that things would switch like this; Leafy being welcomed back into the group, back into society, and you... somewhere in the forest. I mean, things aren't perfect- a lot of people are still giving her a stink-eye, even after she tried to fight for us. Crazy, right?

Some people are just hard to get through...

When we first moved to Yoyle City, I was over the moon when you told me you wanted to start a garden. Perhaps it was that co-captain chivalry that made me happy for you. Or maybe it was my own denial about my growing feelings towards you.

Whichever the case, I can still remember the way your face glowed once I expressed that excitement. I remember you telling me how nobody bothered to listen to your gardening talks, or your random knowledge dumps about Yoyle Biology. To this day, that still makes me laugh- I could listen to your facts about seeds all day.

But when you mentioned your garden, your first garden that you'd ever share with the rest of us, I knew that our future held so many possibilities for the both of us. No matter what or who came our way, we'd stick together as a team, making the best out of what we had.

You let me stay as I watched you work. Finding the right seeds, finding the right spot. That original garden in your backyard wasn't enough, and you got so frustrated at the dying plants, when, in reality... the buildings

blocked the sun itself.

I thought it was beautiful. It sounds crazy. But I did. Every single garden you've mentioned and made held a special place in my heart. And when you gushed about the one garden that was finally able to bloom, it was all blown out of the water.

I used to love your garden.

It reminded me of you- I could see your passion and hard work in every tulip and dandelion that grew from the ground.

But no matter how hard I tried, I could never understand why you mired it with the blood of your own friends.

My friends.

Can you hear their screams? Wherever you are?

Can you hear mine?

I hope the food I bring is enough for you.

~~Love~~ *Sincerely,*

Coiny

Another Rainy Day

"That's it- that was the last straw! I can't do this anymore!"

'What? You still have to get through the ligament there! If anything, you gave him a mere-'

"I'm not talking about that, I-I'm talking about- this! ALL of this! I can't keep chasing people for you whenever I see them, I could get caught!"

'Hah! Like that's a bad thing...'

"It IS! They'll already be terrified when they find out this is happening again- a-and when they see that I'M the one doing this?!"

'They'll COWER beneath you!'

"I don't WANT that!"

'It's what Pin wanted...'

"I'm not her."

'Really? That blood on your hands says otherwise sweetheart~'

"...It was never Pin who did all of this.. was it.."

'...It was always many, many people, □□□□□... many people who I inhabited.. there is no questioning it... simply... build the garden.'

"You know I'm not that strong, I-... why-... why did you choose me...?"

'Please. You know that answer- it lies deep within that shimmering mind of yours. I'm just here to help you find it...'

"We could've helped Pin... we could've saved her, I-..."

'Hey! Get your mind off of that volatile thumbtack. Get to cutting!'

"H-He keeps crying..."

'Nothing new there! The sound of him drowning in his blood is quite hilarious.'

"Won't they be able to recover him..?"

'How many times do I have to say it; they're both unable to die. That yoylite is keeping their souls in tact with their own bodies- helping their hearts beat, despite the injuries!~'

"So they can't?"

'Nope. They're still alive after all.'

"H-He won't stop crying... he could get us caught-"

'Not with that slit throat, he won't! You did great, dear~'

"There needs to be more order."

'Huh? Order?'

"I never wanted to hurt him- I-... I can't let something like this happen again..."

'Oh, suck it up, will you. This is how it must go.'

"Can't I have a say in this?!"

'If I want my garden to fail- I suppose so! I let that thumbtack pick and choose who she went for- she even made her own set of rules, haha!'

"Rules..?"

'Yes. Tried to make herself feel better by devising a plan to aid in my garden- yet, I never told her that it was all meaningless...'

"...That list... you-.."

'I sure did! Oh- he's crying for his mother again?! Ugh. Take care of that,

will you?!'

....

'HELLOOOO?! Do I have to do ALL of the work around here?!'

"Not if you let me choose."

'Choose? Choose... what, exactly?'

"If I make my own list- my own rules and people for the garden- I'll listen to you. I....I won't go against your word."

'Jeez, another one, huh? Give it a break darling, you know it won't–'

"Please."

'Well, I can't have you making your own set of rules- you're new, after all! Why, you'd be stumbling over your own feet to try and keep your identity hidden!'

"Then let me choose who I get. Let me choose who goes next- and I'll listen to you."

'Hmm...'

"..I promise. I.. I won't fight against you. I won't defy your words or try to escape anymore. If you let me choose who goes... I'll do whatever you say."

'Whatever I say, hm...? I suppose... since you asked so politely...'

"Then, I-"

'YOU DIDN'T LET ME FINISH!'

"...."

'HAH! You should've seen the look on your face- priceless!! Though, as I was saying... I'll let you make your little list. On ONE condition.'

"What is it..."

'You take my recommendations. My advice. I may be ruthless- but I am not wasteful. Everyone has to find their way back into the soil, after all...'

"..But.. I..."

'I'm only trying to make sure it goes as smoothly as possible, with nothing hindering our success... I'm sure you wouldn't want them finding out about this happening again- all because of you...'

"...Fine."

'Wonderful! My- you're blooming into SUCH perfection, dear~ we'll have our little garden in no time! But for now...'

'Let me suggest that you start with someone... strong. Your strength is powerful, but oh, so limited... we can't be wasteful now, can we...?'

Blocky

"...I'm so sorry..."

'Aww, is that for me? Or are you monologuing for your precious little friends?'

"...."

'Ugh. You and your little silent treatments- get that list set and- Ugh! Get that brat to quiet DOWN!'

My soul pleaded against her. But my soul was beginning to vanish.

My own self was beginning to vanish.

I never wanted this. I never wanted this to happen again. But it was. And despite everything, there was nothing anyone could do to stop it.

It was happening. It kept happening. Over, and over again.

I once hoped there was a way to stop this.

Now, I smile. All I do is smile, as I lift the trowel into my hands.

It's all I can do.

"Don't worry," I whisper through a smirk. "I'll find a way to keep him quiet."

"Ow!"

Pain stabbed through Basketball's chest. Immediately, she shot herself up from the crouched position she was in, wincing as the pain would crash against her like the ocean's waves, permeating through the surface before settling into the center of her heart.

It was so sudden- she found herself struggling to take in a breath of air, fueling the panic that was striking at her mind. There was no way she just hurt herself- she was working on the brand new recovery center, for pump's sake!

What could have caused it?!

Shivering, the sports ball failed to contain her panicked breaths from spreading through the, what once was, comfortable silence. It captured the attention of her dearest lab partner, and as Robot Flower looked back towards her, she gasped, immediately placing her tools down before rushing over.

"Basketball?!" the robotic voice called, carefully placing her hands on the sides of the scientist's face. "Basketball- hey! Look at me!"

Grueling seconds come and go, and with a few blinks, Basketball's pain vanishes. She stood still, catching her breath from the sudden pain that had struck her before noticing the hands that cradled her face, ever so gently.

One would think she'd recognize the familiar face of her best mechanical friend before her. Still, the sports ball jumps in shock, a blush immediately blooming on her cheeks like the first rose of spring.

"R-Robot Flower!" She shrieked. "OMP- I-I'm so sorry! I thought I- there was this-"

"Basketball." The robot shook her head. "Why are you apologizing?! I thought you got hurt, I wasn't going to leave you here like nothing!"

"I-It wasn't really an injury..."

"What happened? Are you feeling okay?"

"I just felt this-... pain...? It was so weird- it struck out of nowhere, and.. and.." Basketball could feel the words slipping away as her eyes locked onto the metallic plant's face. She'll admit- it was a bad habit of hers, to get lost in the structure of Robot Flower's face.

Yet there was something so captivating- so beautiful- about her facial structures, that the poor scientist's heart practically fluttered at the sight. She sees her every day, spends every moment by her side, yet she falls in love with every passing glance she gives.

Because of that, she fails to notice the robotic bloom shaking her as carefully as she could. "Basketball!"

"Ack- sorry, sorry!"

"Do you need me to get Tennis Ball?"

"No! I promise, I just- gah..." As her words trailed off, Basketball couldn't help but silently curse herself for the interaction. How pathetic could she possibly be?! First, the pain- and now, this??

There was now way she would ever actually-

"Oh jee- elevated heart rate... flushed cheeks, dilated pupils- are you having a stroke?!"

Robot Flower's words made Basketball shake her head. "No! No, i-it's not that, I..."

So. This is how it was gonna be?

"Then what's the matter? Did someone hurt you?? Tell me who it was- I'll put them in their PLACE, I- wait..."

"R-Robot Flower, please..." Taking a deep breath, Basketball adjusted her posture, her heart beginning to slow its pace. She knew she couldn't keep it away for much longer; hoping it would've happened someplace nicer, she quickly pushed that shame aside.

After all, they had worked together here for months. They shared their laughs, their knowledge, and the secrets that they hid away from all others to see. It was only fitting for it to happen here.

Come on Basketball, she thought to herself, you can do this. Just tell her how you feel. Just-

"P-please correct me if I've been reading this wrong," Robot Flower stuttered, catching the sports ball off her guard. She looked up, confused at the blooms words.

"Robot Flower..." Basketball could practically see her metallic face overheat from the moment, thinking that it was an error in her programming- that is, until the robot spoke once more.

"Basketball, w-well... ever since we've- escaped the TLC, I've always found myself enjoying every moment with you..."

Basketball's eyes glistened softly as she heard her speak. "Oh.."

"I'm n-not one to feel things- my programming is usually in charge of that, yet whenever you're around, I feel rather- weird... I can't explain it, but I know that it's a good feeling..."

The pain Basketball once felt melted into an enamored embrace, while Robot Flower continued.

"I-... OMB, what is this feeling.."

"Hey- hey, don't freak out..." Basketball said quietly, blush glowing from her cheeks as she stepped closer to the taller object. "I know it all too well..."

"Y-You do?"

She nodded. "I can't really pretend anymore.. Robot Flower- you are everything."

"Basketball.."

"E-Ever since we first met, it felt like I've known you for a lifetime- I felt this way since the moment I first laid my eyes on you.. you need to know that.."

Hesitant, the sports ball let her eyes glance at Robot Flower's face once more. The effort it took to keep her from kissing her was too great to overpower- but today, she couldn't hold back. Not anymore.

Basketball leaned in, pressing her lips against the smooth surface of Robot Flower's 'mouth'. She felt her eyes come to a close, seconds passing through while she took the moment in as best as she could.

That is, until she realized what she was doing.

Basketball's eyes snapped open, and she yanked herself back. Regret filled her now racing heart, not hesitating to apologize towards the mechanical mind.

"O-Oh my- Robot Flower, I'm so sorry!" she stuttered, her reddened face looking down in shame. "I never- I-I meant to-"

Her words were immediately sliced into silence when she felt the pair of metallic arms wrap around her body. Basketball didn't even have the chance to gasp, before Robot Flower yanked her back up, letting her metallic face press against Basketball's, a small electric shock buzzing straight into the other's lips.

She could barely hold back the squeak of surprise, quiet smacks and smooches filling the atmosphere with countless galaxies, supernovas

bursting as their 'lips' intertwined. Quiet smacks broke the hush like the striking impact of a meteor, their souls waltzing through a sea of stars which blanketed before them.

They kissed. They actually kissed- and Basketball could feel her heart fluttering with every zap she felt.

The sound of Basketball's muffled giggles made the bloom clutch her closer- that is, before the doors to the lab swung open.

"UHH- BASKETBALL? GOLFBALL?? ARE YOU THERE??" A robotic voice called from the top of the stairs.

Oh, CRAP.

The two would quickly bounce away from each other, scrambling around the lab to find something they could immerse themselves into. All the while, footsteps rang through the underground laboratory, as a group quickly found their way into the scene with their own worries in hand.

A flat-screen tv turned to face the lightswitch beside him, carefully making his way down. "How is she feeling?" he asked.

"Ugh- I can't risk her falling down the stairs." The lightswitch huffed, carrying an oversized remote in her arms. "I can bring her down myself."

"Well, we are almost there. I am sure the two can help her- if not, the recovery centers are available for us to-"

TV's words were cut short as all three made their way into the room. Rather than catching a glimpse at the two renowned scientists of the city, he instead catches sight of a disheveled basketball, staring at an empty beaker with a focused glare. Beside her, Robot Flower silently flipped through the pages of a pink-covered book, her head nodding with every sentence she came across.

It didn't take long for Liy to notice the scene. Carefully helping Remote back onto the ground, she'd look towards the two, puzzled by the scene before her.

Why the hell was Robot Flower reading a book called "How to Be Dumb"?

And why was she reading it upside down..?

"Uhhh.. did we.. interrupt something...?" Liy questioned, her eyebrow raising slightly towards the two.

Poor Basketball's face practically radiated from her own blush and fluster, because TV picked up on it.

"Maybe we should go-" his televised voice began, before Liy raised her hand in their direction.

"Nuh-uh. We need to get this fixed before it festers into something out of our control."

"Before what gets out of your control?" Robot Flower spoke, her voice glitching slightly as she cleared the hushed nervousness from her voice box. "What's going on?"

"We have a problem, you two," said Liy. "It's been bugging them ever since we were freed from that stupid metal box."

Of course. When wasn't there ever a problem? Taking that first step to freedom should have made the sports ball realize the responsibility which blanketed over her own being. Both Golfball and Tennis Ball weren't there; every object had no choice but to rely on her for their next steps.

Basketball only nodded in response.

"Care to tell us what the problem is, then?" Robot Flower questioned, crossing her arms with an audible huff. "We don't exactly have all day- just tell us where it hurts and we'll get you what you need."

"It's not us."

"I- uh.." Caught off guard by the sudden response, Robot Flower shook her head, her metal hands lowering back to her sides. "..It's- not you..?"

"It's the robots." Liy said softly.

Robots. The robots!

Basketball remembered their mechanical companions, she didn't mean to let them slip free from her mind. She became heavily focused on every object around her, trying to keep them from dying during the construction of the recovery center; she nearly forgot about the robotic contestants that were trapped alongside her.

She let her gaze fall upon the robots before her. "What's wrong?"

Remote's mouth opened, yet no sound broke past her. At first, she seemed to have trouble finding the words to describe the kind of pain she was experiencing- but when the usual glow of her eyes flickered, the robot would stumble, her limbs giving in. Liy quickly scooped her up when she noticed her stumbling, concern clouding her mind from the rationality that kept her cool.

"S-She's been like this all day," she began, her voice shaking. "We don't know what could have caused this.."

"All day? This started two days ago!" TV interjected, his pixelated eyebrows furrowing together.

"No way. I saw her yesterday- she was just fine!"

"We are roommates, Liy. Remote told me she was not feeling well, she was trying to-"

"Okay, break it up!" Robot Flower stepped in between the two, her arms poised to keep the tensions from escalating. "Fighting won't resolve anything, here!"

"Robot Flower's right." Basketball chimed in.

With a hesitant glare, the two objects would then nod silently, much to Basketball's relief. She sighed, starting on a clean slate, making sure the two could have their respective chances of speaking.

"Now, let's start from the beginning here. TV- you said she was starting to feel weird two days ago?"

"Precisely." TV said. "You know that hotel- Live Hotel- the one in the city, yes?"

"How could I not? Balloony and Cloudy are staying there with Rocky- Grassy goes along with them sometimes."

"Yes. Usually, Remote and I wake up before the sun rises to enjoy the view from the floor we are staying in. Both of us had no trouble getting out of bed at that time, but two days ago, Remote was fast asleep- I let her be, but when I returned to the room, she was still in her respective bed."

"I see... Did you try waking her up?"

"It took a few tries, but she did. That is when I started noticing her eyes."

The dimming glow. Basketball wasn't the only one who captured that flicker. "Her dying lights..?"

"She is never this faulty- and when she reached a near-shutdown yesterday, I had to bring her here."

Nodding, Basketball would turn to let Liy speak, but jumped as Robot Flower interrupted her thoughts.

"Sounds like she needs new batteries," the metallic plant stated, folding her arms neatly across her chest. Liy frowned, adjusting Remote carefully before moving towards them.

"Uh, but what about-"

"No need."

Glancing down, Robot Flower could see the frustrated gaze that radiated from the light switch. She didn't mean to cut her off in such a way, as she wanted to help as much as possible- but when it came to the well-being of another mechanical object, she could instantly find the root of the issue, much faster than the previous duo ever could.

Tapping her chin in thought, the robotic bloom would lean down,

letting herself get a closer look at Remote's complexion. The poor woman could barely tell where she was, with her eyes fixed onto the ceiling, her chest rising ever so slightly with every breath that she took. The buttons on her forehead glowed and flickered, much like her pupils, and this was enough to cement her own hypothesis into approval.

Yet, she had to check to be sure. "Come on Remote- we want to help you." she said, holding her hand out for her fellow robot friend.

Remote's eyes blink unevenly, trying to process Basketball's words. Before she could speak again, Robot Flower stepped forward.

"We won't let you die," she said, her voice lilting ever so softly. "We promise- the new recovery centers will have what we need to make sure of it."

She could see Remote's eyes flickering, her pupils now lifting to meet Robot Flower's. "I'll change your batteries. After all, us mechanical minds have to stick together, right?"

Remote haltingly stepped towards the taller woman. She found herself freezing slightly, before TV rushed to her side, carefully guiding her towards the table where she could be treated. She plunked onto the surface, her energy dwindling with every movement she made.

The others could tell by her expression that death was a hidden terror to her- if, robots could even have those terrors. Besides the exhaustion and confusion that radiated from her face, her eyes would flicker with fear, unsure if she'd actually have the chance to wake up once more.

Yet, there was no need to fear. There was a recovery center- it was right across the room!

Then why was she...

She feels a hand brush against her back. The noises from the world around her fell into a deep hum, and before she knew it, Remote powered off.

"Well? How's it working with her?"

"SHE SLEPT FOR A FULL NINE HOURS!! IT'S THE MOST SLEEP SHE'S GOTTEN IN FOREVER!"

Flinching, Fanny couldn't help but roll her eyes, pouting with unease. "I still don't trust that stupid medicine- I mean, how could something like that work?! With no side effects or issues?!"

Bracelety tilted her head. "IS IT WORKING FOR BUBBLE?"

"It is. And I hate it."

"WHY?!"

The electrical fan opened her mouth, but hesitancy forced her words back into the crevices of her mind. She didn't want to keep Bubble in that damned state she was once in with her waking from unspoken nightmares, screaming endlessly and frantically punching at the air around her.

Whatever Golfball made had stopped those episodes. And now here Fanny was stuck in the clubhouse with Bracelety, while the others were off doing their own thing.

Pencil and Match had both gone to the canal to cool off. Flower and Ruby were taking a walk. Book had returned from her daily morning walk, though, she was off grabbing some ingredients for a dish she wanted to prepare, and Bubble...

She had told Fanny she needed more yoyleberries- that Leafy had her own stash that she wished to ask for. Of course, Fanny offered to give her company, but the soap bubble immediately declined.

It was the first time Fanny could feel her own heart breaking. And she hated it.

Now, her girlfriend had become a former shell of herself. That cheerful woman she had met long ago was-

Hey. Bubble was still there. Fanny knew she was- yet, the horrors she had to endure kept her true self hidden from plain sight.

"..I think I'm just... worried." Fanny uttered. "..I really don't want to mess things up here."

"BUT YOU WON'T!" Bracelety exclaimed.

"I could. You, of all people, know how I am. Bubble was someone who helped me control myself- but now?" Hesitating, Fanny looked away. "...I have to be the one who helps her control herself."

"SHE'S SO CALM, THOUGH!"

"To you, she is. I let her open up when we're alone, and everything she tells me makes me hate myself even more."

"WH- DON'T YOU MEAN YOU HATE THE GIRL WHO DID ALL THIS?!"

"No. I hate myself. Because at the end of the day, I was the one who told that monster where Bubble went off to."

A hush fell upon the two. Bracelety's mouth curled into a frown at the memory, realizing that they had fallen under Pin's act by telling her everything they had known. She watched Fanny's tail droop with anger, her eyes narrowing as she looked away.

"...Now, my Bubble is gone," she uttered weakly. "And it's all because of me."

Guilt boiled at the center of Fanny's throat, forcing her to clamp her lips together. With her vision beginning to blur, her heart screamed its endless hatred at the realization that she was on the verge of tears- better yet, right in front of someone- and she had to do something about it, quickly.

Fanny's thoughts soon came to a halt, as Bracelety's arms wrapped around the other woman. Her body tensed up, her plug-tail flicking as she was unused to the sudden display of affection from the other object. Hell, she was just about to go on another hateful tirade, before Bracelety spoke.

"It was not our fault," the blue bracelet whispered, clutching her gently. "..It never was."

Bracelety continued to hold on, despite her friends' tense posture. She could feel her plug-tail waving angrily out of protest, but her eyes widened when she heard a quiet sniffle coming from Fanny.

She held her closer.

It was all she could do. All they could do.

The two stayed that way, offering each other a shoulder to lean on.

No matter what.

"If there are not any batteries, will the recovery center work for her?" TV asked, watching Robot Flower unscrew the back of Remote's covering. "There is always the kill and recover technique..."

The words made Robot Flower freeze in her movements. While she didn't want to kill the poor thing, that option could save their time and efforts, rather than letting the stress pile up on her and Basketball. Pulling the final screw out, she lifted the plastic covering, her eyes being met with the batteries in Remote's body.

"I don't know if we should.." she whispered, carefully plucking the batteries out. The springs of her compartment twitched as the other removed them from their place, letting her eyes scan at the metallic cylinders in her hand.

Just as she had suspected, they were completely drained.

Walking over, Basketball would tap at Remote's head. "It wouldn't hurt to try," she whispered, glancing up at her beloved lab partner. "Is she still- alive..?"

"With her batteries now out of her system- no." The robot shook her head.

"Then let me see..."

The orange sports ball swiftly made her way towards the recovery center, giving one last glance towards the group at the table. Their reassuring nods were enough to convince her to test their idea- at least, to save themselves from being bombarded with more chaos than they could handle.

They didn't mean it out of any bad intent; with TB and GB still recovering from their own issues, she was now left responsible for every object in the city. On top of that, she was a moth-

Caretaker. A caretaker of one of them.

She silently typed out the name.

R-E-M-O-T-E.

ERROR! ERROR!

NONEXISTENT.

A screeching crash stabbed through the atmosphere in the lab. The usual, green glow from the screen was now a pulsating red, the light emitting a damning glow on Basketball's own face. With each blink of the error, her eyes absorbed the sight before her, a new kind of terror soon blanketing over her mind.

Nonexistent. They were objects- just like her, just like every other object in the city. How could they be nonexistent?!

Remote was dead. No way could she still be conscious if her batteries were out of her system; was the machine beginning to bust from the recoveries that were made?

Soon, Liy's voice interrupted her racing thoughts. "What? What's the problem?"

"It says there's.. an issue..?" Basketball couldn't recognize her own voice, as it had now fallen into a petrified whisper. "I don't know how... I..."

"Did the recovery center break?!"

"NO! No no- there's got to be an explanation to this! Here, let me try again..."

R-E-M-O-T-E.

ERROR! ERROR!

NONEXISTENT.

Now, Basketball was completely unprepared. One would think that being in charge for the past few months would have gotten her in shape to handle a situation such as this one, but the last time the recovery center had busted, every object in the city dropped like flies. And with Tree still missing, alarm bells rang endlessly in her mind.

Shaking her head, she would turn back to the group, finding herself speaking before she could give it a second thought.

"Here- I'll go inform GB about this, and I'll grab some new batteries for Remote. You keep her company while I'm gone, alright?" Basketball said nervously, forcing a smile as the three looked up. Although they wanted to try and speak to her at that moment, she turned away, soon brushing through the halls of the laboratory.

One left, one right, and through the hall she went. An interesting layout that Golfball had come up with herself- thanks to the woman bragging endlessly about it. Despite how much it got to Basketball, she couldn't help but respect the brilliance of the smaller scientist.

Where would anyone be without GB and TB?

A thought that Basketball reminded herself, over and over. Being both a scientist and inventor was anything but easy, yet it only meant that endless tools and goodies were available for the three to use. Spare parts, extra tech... you name it.

To her relief, she silently thanked them when she came across the small bucket of batteries in the closet. Already knowing which one

she needed, the orange sports ball would grab it, and braced herself for where she had to go next.

She knew that GB wouldn't be happy to hear about the news of the recovery center. Or, that of Tree's disappearance. But things were becoming desperate- and now, she couldn't handle this on her own.

Basketball makes her way down the narrow hallways, soon coming face to face with a metal door that stood slightly ajar. She takes a deep breath, ready to knock on the door while bearing the news of these disappearances.

A sound then stops her. She stares, confused for a moment, before sniffling and murmured cries struck her 'ears'. Stepping aside, she pressed her side against the wall, listening to the voices within.

"Golfball, breathe- it's okay..."

"I-It's... not...TB..."

"Rocky's been so much happier! He's beginning to find himself again, Balloony and Cloudy say that he's having a blast in that hotel everyone's staying in and your Zelatonin? It's a miracle cure for us!"

"B-But... oh, putts- I've failed everyone... At the end of the day, I-I failed EVERYONE.. That recovery center was supposed to be built by us- by ME. And she KILLED ME!"

"GB-"

"YOU LEFT ME TO DIE."

"What?! Golfie- no! You told me to run- y-you-"

"Tennis Ball... I never... grr- I-I shouldn't be scared- why am I so SCARED?!"

"Shh... I'm here..."

His quiet consolement punched through Basketball's soul. She knew that the two were missing Rocky- she was the one who recommended them to find a babysitter, after all- yet she was always left in the dark

when she tried asking about Golfball's well-being.

Her mental health.

She couldn't tell them yet.

She couldn't.

Another pain struck at her side. Her mind clouded with confusion, unsure as to what was happening to her; shaking her head, she turned back and quietly returned to the main room of the laboratory.

Liy noticed that orange sports ball. "Well? What'd they say?" she asked, clutching Remote gently as the robotic woman leaned against her shoulder.

"I didn't tell them." Basketball murmured.

"What- did she shoo you away or something?"

"No. I just- we still can't tell them. They're not ready to handle this mess- not at all."

She had to hold herself back from saying that it was happening again. It's not. It isn't.

But... Tree..

To think, she had brushed his disappearance off-

No. No, no. Think, Basketball- there has got to be some logical explanation to this.

.. And Grass-

No.

He's okay. They're okay.

They're okay.

Swallowing the fear that tried to surpass her mind, she swiftly turned away, bringing the batteries back towards the robots. Although her

mind was straying from the path she was intended to take, her feet seemed to go against it; walls closing in and sounds falling into the gaping void of silence.

Soon, Basketball found herself back in the room, face-to-face with her own reflection from the recovery machine. There had to be some way to fix this. There just had to be.

She took in a deep breath, steading her beating heart before taking little steps away from the machine. "Okay..." she said, "I think we need to test the recovery center again."

"Basketball.." Robot Flower whispers, her voice warbling with worry.

"Hey- don't freak out. I'm sure it's something small- we just have to try and test it out again."

This immediately makes Liy step back from the table, her hands flying into the air defensively. "What are you saying?"

"We have to recover someone."

"And how are you going to do that??"

Perhaps she was waiting for Basketball to say something. Or kill her with the strange devices that riddled the entirety of the lab. Instead, she stands there with unease, trying to think of a possible way to get this test done, to prove that the recovery center was, in fact, working. Liy was still weary, as she herself didn't want to be the immediate lab rat out of the group.

These thoughts suddenly settle as the scientist turns towards Robot Flower with a knowing look. Liy catches the taller object catching her gaze, before immediately shaking her head in refusal. She wouldn't- no way in hell would she risk this, especially now.

Every second became grueling; that is, before the sound of rushed footsteps echoed from the entrance once more.

"Bazketball?! Bazketball!"

Everyone recognized that familiar accent anywhere. Believe them,

spending ages in a metal box had each object knowing one another very quickly, and their eyes quickly captured the familiar cloud rushing into the room, Rocky scuttling after him with a small huff.

How strange. Usually, there was a third with them- Balloony, was it?- but the worried look on Cloudy's face was enough to portray the worry he had over his dearest 'friend'.

From what she could tell, they were friends.

"Cloudy! Rocky!" Brushing herself off, the scientist made her way towards the two. "Gosh- is everything alright? What do you need??"

"Zorry Basketball, but gould you regover Balloony?" the cloud asked, his head lowering in shame. "He popped while we were at the park..."

Perfect timing.

"No worries, you two- I got this," Basketball responded, smiling as Cloudy's face would light back up at the answer.

A quiet yet jolly little squeak made the scientist blink. Confused, she couldn't help but look to see where the noise had come from, and when her eyes fell upon a smiling Rocky, and that's when it hit her.

It was getting dark outside...

Where was Grass-

No.

Not now. Not now- she had to help the others.

He'll be back soon.

She had to work.

Typing in Balloony's name, she found herself holding her breath once again, pressing the glowing green button. It activated the machine, and with a few wacky noises and stirring gears, a ding signified the return of the familiar object.

Stunned, Balloony would carefully get himself back onto his feet, before being met with the joyous embrace of his 'close companion', as well as Rocky. This alone was proof that the recovery center was working just fine, yet it was clear that limitations kept its ability to recover anyone and everyone, whether they were object, or not.

And this worried the scientist to no end.

"Well, the machine itself is working," Basketball stated, her head lifting to face the others. "But it won't work with any mechanical object- much like-"

"Why?!" Liy shouted. "They're just like us- aren't they?!"

"Y-Yes, they are! But-"

"Then why can't they be recovered?!"

Quickly, the situation began to dive into panic. Shouts from every object present began to hurl from each side of the room, with Rocky immediately flinching, curling up in the comfort of Balloony's arms. Basketball looked back at the recovery center, the mental image of its inner structures appearing back into her mind.

She had to figure it out.

What made this so different?

The gears were intact, all wiring seemed to be accurate, and-..

....Wait....

"Robot Flower," she stated, her gaze lifting back towards the three. "Do you remember who structured the recovery center before us?"

"Yes- Golfball told me it was Book," said Robot Flower.

"Book... how did she know?"

"Both Bubble and Ice Cube told her so."

"And before that? Before Book?"

"It was Golfball- and, from what I remember... Tennis Ball was the one who started it."

Once she goes down the list of names, Basketball only has a moment to run through her thoughts, before her lips pressed together with worry. With that many hands in charge of this creation- there was no doubt some faults and errors could occur. Golfball only had so many blueprints- as did Tennis Ball- and with the fear and grief stirred in their minds, the chance of this recovery center having its errors skyrocketed much more than she anticipated.

"That explains why they have the scars..." she uttered, moving along the room and back to her lover's side. At the last minute, the robot looks down, placing a hand on her side with worry.

"What's that?" the robotic bloom asked.

"The recovery center is fully functioning for everyone in the city, yet those scars that they came back with- it signified the faultiness of its structure," Basketball explained, her eyebrows creasing with worry. "This can only mean that, while the rest of us can be recovered, your mechanical minds are at risk of permadeath- in case anything does happen."

Now, he had kept his cool for this long- he had to, for his fellow mechanical friend- though, this explanation made TV panic. "You are telling us that we are without a recovery center?!"

"F-For now! Only for now- Robot Flower and I are hard at work with the next two recovery centers. Now that we have a more structuralized approach, we can ensure that these will provide a recovery source for the three of you and Roboty."

"Okay- so what should we do now?"

The question from Robot Flower nearly made her heart break. There was no doubt that she was just as terrified as the rest of them were; despite her scientific knowledge (thanks to Basketball's clever programming), she couldn't help but wonder if there really was a chance of recovery for them.

She was just a robot, after all. A mechanical mind- there wasn't any chance that they themselves had souls... was there?

While Basketball tried to ease both Liy and TV, she caught sight of Robot Flower's hands; incessantly trembling with a twitch every now and then. It was enough to tell her that she was scared, and with a gentle nudge, Basketball would let her eyes close, her girlfriend's arms wrapping around her gently.

Robot Flower's mechanical heartbeat synchronized with Basketball's, and the longer she held on, the less she wanted to let go. They both stayed this way, before a gentle nudge was felt at Basketball's leg, carefully capturing her attention to look down. To her surprise, her eyes locked onto Rocky's once more, blissful unawareness shining in his eyes.

"Is Grassy here?" he asks quietly. "I wanted to say bye before I go back to the hotel.."

Grassy.

The mention of his name was enough to make Basketball and Robot Flower's eyes lock onto one another. Both of them knew that Grassy's curfew had long passed- there was no way he could still be out there at a time like this.

Immediately, Basketball looked down towards him. "I think he's over at Blocky's... why don't you go back with Balloony- I can bring him over, first thing tomorrow morning. Okay?"

Rocky nodded, his smile growing as he made his way back towards his two caretakers. She refrained from saying anything more, until she watched the three make their way up the stairs, and the sound of the closing door was enough to make the sports ball look up with worry.

"Hey," Robot Flower held her cheek gently. "You said it yourself- he could be at Blocky's."

"Even so, he would have brought him over by now," said Basketball, tears prickling at the corner of her eyes.

"Please. You and I know how Blocky can be- he's probably letting Grassy stay the night again."

"Without giving us a heads up..?"

"Something Blocky would do. Here- why don't you change Remote's batteries? Get these three back to the hotel- I can go get-"

"Nuh-uh. Now there's no way I'm letting you out of my sight," Basketball whispers tearfully.

Oh, right. The robot flinched, her hands brushing against the sides of Basketball's head. "Basketball..."

"Listen. Let's get Remote fixed up. We'll go pick him up together- okay..?"

"Are you sure..?"

"Yes. I-.." The image of Grassy would fade into her sight. Her heart ached, and for a quick second, she swore she could feel pain slice through her throat. Yet, she shook her head, getting her mind back onto the situation at hand.

"..I'm sure of it. We'll get him back home- but for now, let's get this taken care of."

Bracelety was helping Ice Cube get into bed, despite the sunlight that poured into the room. A sweetened scent permeated through the new clubhouse- perhaps it was from one of Saw's treats that she had gifted to them- or Book's cake- but the quiet clashing of pans meant that somebody else was cooking.

She knew Fanny was asleep. Bubble had asked where she was when she returned from her yoyleberry journey that morning (all within a lovely basket that carried too many to count)- and with her soapy surface now gray, she decided that she'd let her lover rest with ease.

Must be Bubble in the kitchen, then. Whatever she was making turned the new clubhouse into a bakery of its own. There were so many sweets- Bracelety wanted to eat all of it! At least, after she helped Icy, of course.

The blue bracelet carefully helped Ice Cube up, her stomach rumbling loudly at the smell of cake. But she shook her head, focusing on her girlfriend as she would settle back in.

"I'm tired..." Ice Cube whispered, her eyelids fighting against the exhaustion that tried to bring them to a close. Bracelety carefully adjusted the pillow behind her, helping Ice Cube lean against it with gentle movements.

"HERE WE GO.." The blue bracelet would smile, noticing that her girlfriend was finally getting used to her senses once more. "IS THIS COMFORTABLE..?"

Ice Cube hesitated. She couldn't help but try and swim through possible responses, trying to find the words to say towards her girlfriend, before it broke past her lips.

"Could you stay with me..?"

Her voice, so gentle, yet riddled with unease. The quiet plea from the frozen cube made Bracelety's heart melt; she didn't think twice before she carefully plopped beside her, giving her enough space to breathe, yet draping a gentle arm around her body.

Every touch of Bracelety's gentle hand never failed to make roses of

blush bloom on Ice Cube's face. She couldn't help but feel a pit of guilt hanging low within her stomach; she had waited so long to finally see the woman she had fallen in love with, only to panic and cry at any movement she made with her aching body. Their reunion was a thought that helped carry Icy through those damned times, as it was nothing more than a reassurance, a promise as to what awaited them if they stopped Pin, surviving in the process.

In the end, they managed to accomplish what they had hoped for, at the cost of their lives.

Feeling the tears that threatened to crawl from her eyes, Ice Cube took a shaky breath in. To her surprise, she could feel Bracelety tenderly wiping them away, her movements so careful that it made her heart melt. She gave her a smile, serving as an unspoken thank you, before she made a careful effort to move closer towards her body.

Bracelety shook her head, hushing her under her breath. She made sure she was careful, moving herself closer at Ice Cube's request. And when their eyes locked within each other's gaze, they could feel the environment around them fading away, melting into the vast beauty of space itself.

They were once separated by the cold, metal walls of the TLC. Now, they were finally reunited; in this rare moment of lucidity, they were both finally aware of one another, their eyes taking in the beauty from each other.

To Ice Cube, Bracelety was more than the stars- she was the sun herself, her joyful attitude brightening every atmosphere she entered through. Her cheers and endless motivation permeated through a darkened hopelessness, such as the rays of the sun, washing upon her with a shower of twinkling lights.

Oh, but for Bracelety, Ice Cube wasn't just a mere star, or a planet itself- she was the entire universe to her.

And she was ecstatic to exist in the same universe as her dear lover. The two stayed within each other's embrace, though they couldn't help but lean in closer, and closer...

This all came to an end when Bracelety winced, quickly retracting her hand to hold her own cheek.

"Ow.." The sudden whine of pain made Ice Cube blink. Frowning, she sat up, carefully moving closer to her despite the pain that soared through her 'skin'.

"Are you okay..?" Ice Cube whispered, not daring to speak above a murmur. Bracelety was confused at first- bewildered, even- by the fact that Ice Cube was speaking beyond a few mere sentences. She had even moved without thinking or hesitating. Progress..?

But the concern that glowed in Icy's striking blue eyes made Bracelety gasp, gently cupping her hands around her girlfriend's face.

"NO NO- I'M FINE, ICY!" She assured, using her thumbs to caress her face gently.

Ice Cube held the tears, the stress causing her to shiver under Bracelety's hold. "D-Did someone- hurt you..?"

"NOPE! IT'S JUST- MY TOOTH!"

"Your tooth..?"

Nodding, Bracelety would point at her own cheek, somewhat patting it so that the pain could subside. "THERE'S A TOOTH IN THE BACK THAT'S BEEN BOTHERING ME- I DUNNO WHAT THE PROBLEM IS!"

"Sounds like your wisdom teeth, to me. I don't recall you getting them removed, have you?"

The foreign voice made the two jump. The bracelet had forgotten to close the door earlier (due to the suddenness of Icy's awakening), and as a result, their conversation could be heard throughout the entire house, with Book standing in the doorway, her arms crossed.

"B-Book!" Ice Cube stammered, sitting up with a wince. "Are you- okay?? Was there a-"

"I'm fine." Book snapped, crossing her arms. "I just couldn't sleep. I finished the cake I made earlier, so I'm going to grab a slice."

"Y-You made a cake..?"

"Yeah. I saved slices for everyone- in case you wanted any."

"Book..."

"Oh- Your door was also open. I could hear you from-"

"OH- THE DOOR! BOOK, I'M SO SORRY!!"

The reverberations of Bracelety's voice alone shot through Book's spine.

Her eyes widened, her heterochromatic pupils shrinking as her brain was forcefully ripped from the present plane that she was standing in. She stood in fear, watching as the familiar sight of Freesmart's new home vanished into the inky abyss of her mind, the same frequency echoing through the heavy atmosphere. With the sound snaking around her brain, it constricted itself around her soul, squeezing every last breath out of her.

She was back.

The ropes. The ones that kept her bound.

The darkened room.

A smile. Her smile. That damned smile, expressing the vicious satisfaction of the sins that she had committed- and the eyes that locked onto her, as if they were burning a hole through her very heart.

It all flashed through her eyes.

The trowel.

The remote.

Ruby's shards, twinkling with every movement.

Pin's cackle.

The shredder.

Shredder.

Shredder.

Metal teeth, piercing through her flesh and grinding her bones and joints into mush.

Her veins bursting, her nerves snapping, the pain that was so great, it forced her breath away.

The loud roar of the machine.

The screeching.

The sound of tearing flesh.

No.

Grinding gears.

Roars of clashing metal.

Screams of shredding bones.

Make it stop. Make it stop.

No.

NO.

"NOOOO!" Book's scream pierced through the air, as she immediately sprang to her feet, holding her arms out in a defensive manner. Her breaths were heavy, her lungs burning from the wildfire of panic that permeated through her shivering body.

Yet she couldn't see the figure before her, rushing from the bed, frantically trying to get her attention.

Ice Cube has to say Book's name several times before she manages to break through. With tears rolling down her scarred cover, Book's quaking gaze locked onto Icy's, a tense silence filling the air between them. Despite the lack of arms, Ice Cube would carefully press against Book's chest, ignoring the phantom pains that sliced through

her skin.

She needed to be here. She had to.

She couldn't leave their friendship behind anymore.

"Book.." Ice Cube spoke quietly, looking up with a shiver. "Book-.. it's okay..."

"I-I..Ice.. Cube...?" Book sputtered, beads of sweat blotted on her forehead, unable to stop her limbs from tumbling like wild leaves. Hearing her speak, Ice Cube gave her friend a smile, forcing the pain back as she helped her back to her feet.

"That's it- y-yes!" the smaller object replied, keeping her voice at a low volume. "It's me- you're okay, I promise..."

Worriedly, Bracelety would rush over to help the two. Her mouth opened, wanting to ask if there was anything she could do, yet she was quickly cut off as Icy shook her head, worriedly sticking her leg towards her as if she were telling her to stop.

They already grounded her from this panic attack. Who knows how the next one could be.

Book's eyes continued to stare down at Ice Cube, the world around her carefully fading into the view. Just as quick as the panic attack had hit, it had left, leaving nothing behind but her own racing heart and shivering body.

Her arms had already found their way around Ice Cube. She clutched her smaller friend close to herself, sobs beginning to build up beneath her chest.

Sobs..?

When was the last time she had cried in front of someone..?

In front of a friend..?

Almost as if she knew what she was feeling, Ice Cube would look up, letting their gazes meet once more. "I-It's okay," she whispered. "I'm

staying right here."

Stay.

All she's ever wanted was for someone to stay.

For someone to see her.

Now, here she was. A chance to finally heal, right beside her closest friend and face the ever-evolving future before her, together.

..She still chose her over me.

Book flinched. No, no-

She chose her, over me.

No, please-

Both of them.

They both chose someone else.

Over me.

....

"Let go," she whispered, her gentle voice now falling into a blank murmur. Ice Cube looked up, dismayed by the sudden change in her friend.

"What..?"

"I have to go."

Every movement that Book made daggers of pain slice at her skin, forcing her to pull away from the smaller object. She was supposed to be used to this by now- everyone would leave her, no matter how hard she tried to be there for them.

She'd give them every last ounce of love that she had, all to express how grateful she was to have them within her life. Book knew what it was like to never feel seen in such a way; she refused to let anyone

feel that bitter loneliness evermore.

Yet, that led to people walking all over her, taking every crumb of love she gave and leaving her to rot.

Book thought it'd be different for the first time in her life.

Yet she found herself alone once more.

Ice Cube desperately tried to pull her back, but squeaked as Book silently pushed her away. Any attempt she made to stop her was futile- despite how badly she wanted to rekindle their strained friendship- but she could only watch as the blue and green object grabbed a small bag, silently making her way towards the door. She could faintly make out a few slices of cake within it, packaged neatly in little plastic bags.

"Book," Ice Cube called out for her. "A-are you sure?? You were-"

"I just have to go."

With a bitter reply, and a cold glare, Book would then leave the clubhouse, slamming the door behind her.

"Blocky! Someone's at the door!"

"Snowball, you're right next to it. Can't you get it yourself?"

"Nah."

"Ugh. Oh- hey Bee-Ball. Hey Robot Flower. Fancy seeing you two here."

"Blocky- have you seen Grassy?"

"Woah. Not even a hello? And here I thought you were polite, Bee-Ball!"

"Ugh- now's not the time. Where's Grassy?!"

"The kid was with you, wasn't he?"

"We let him play outside for a little while and we got some work done on the recovery centers."

"Smart move, Robot."

"Shut up, Blocky."

"Well, the kid isn't here. It's just me and Snowball for the time being- since we get to have him over on weekends."

"Is this another one of your funny doings?! Is it, huh?! Where IS HE?!"

"Woah- Basketball-"

"What's going on?"

"Snowball, you haven't seen Grassy around today, have you?"

"No?"

"....."

"...Oh no."

Gelatin was instructed to stay within the city- to not wander beyond its outskirts, and to refrain from setting foot into that damned forest again.

It wasn't much- at least, to Fries. In fact, he swore that it wasn't that big of a deal. He never set foot into that forest, and he turned out fine.

Well, he didn't set foot there. Until she made him.

But, to Gelatin- it made him feel worse. He couldn't stand being in the enclosed space of his home any longer. No, he needed some time in the open air.

So he snuck out. He was careful to do so, carefully stepping by Fries and Puffball's room. They were still asleep, as the Zelatonin stuff was really helping them catch up on the rest that they had lost during that grueling two-week period after recovery.

Now that there was nobody screaming in horror at night, they could finally rest.

Knowing that, it only made Gelatin feel more calmer, knowing that they wouldn't notice a thing. He had left the house long ago, now wandering aimlessly through the city and remembering the familiar sights that had been buried from the traumatic events that unfolded.

He continued to walk, suddenly hearing the low rumbles of an impending thunderstorm. Springtime usually resulted in a lot of rainfall for the city, and although some found their peace with the quiet pattering of raindrops against their roofs, others had to quickly

find their way to shield themselves from the water that poured from above.

And that's when he realized.

"Oh- CRAP. The umbrella!" Gelatin uttered, quickly slapping his forehead in disbelief. So much for the snarky comment he gave earlier...

Hold on. There shouldn't be any need to worry- there has got to be an umbrella somewhere amongst these abandoned buildings! Yoyle City had been left practically untouched, there was no way that one of these places wouldn't have such a thing, Gelatin was sure that he could find one and be on his way.

But the haunting rumbles of thunder soon rolled in, quaking the peaceful city with every clap. The clouds that covered the usual-yellow sky darkened, winds becoming distant with the smell of a storm prickling at the air.

Once that first raindrop hit on the top of his head, Gelatin couldn't help but flinch.

Oh no... he thought to himself. *Now I have to go back- I won't have enough time to look, and then he's going to find out I left.*

He wastes no time in turning around. His steps lead him back through the way he came, passing the abandoned shops and workplaces he had gazed upon curiously mere moments ago.

Yet, there was no time to lose himself in the environment, as the raindrops were beginning to grow more frequent, pelting against him at an increasing speed. He could feel his gelatinous body becoming soggier by the second, and, to his dismay, he realized that there wouldn't be any way to return home without becoming a mere pile of mush.

"Gross..!" he murmured to himself, quickly wiping away the bits of his own body as it crumbled from the brush of his hand. A mere drizzle soon fell into a pouring storm, leaving Gelatin no other choice than to rush beneath the tent-like ceiling of an abandoned bakery.

There was a sense of panic that tugged at the center of Gelatin's heart. He truly didn't want to upset Fries- that was his friend, after all!- but after the talk that Firey had with the dessert, Gelatin couldn't help but reach out for his friends, wanting to connect once more to reach some sense of normalcy in this damned city.

It was a talk that he wished to have with Fries. But he had returned to the former state of his own self- albeit, completely shut off from the others around him.

With another faint hum from the thunder above, Gelatin shut his eyes, resting his head against his knees as he listened to the sound of the storm around him. It lulled him, assuaging the worries he had as he let himself become lost in the song of the storm.

At least, until someone cleared their throat. Confused, Gelatin quickly lifted his head from his knees, his eyes being greeted with the sight of... a taco.. and a really tall lollipop.

"Fancy seeing you out in the open," the sentence rolled smoothly from Lollipop's tongue, her hand on her hip as her fingers readjusted to the handles of her umbrella. "Did you feel the need to become one with the environment today?"

Taco gave her a nudge, much to the taller woman's dismay. "Lolli!"

"Please- who would sit out during a storm like this one?"

"You should ask yourself that question," Gelatin responded, sitting back up. "What are you two doing out here?"

"Why, I'm afraid I'll have to pass on that question, fellow neighbor."

"We needed groceries."

"Taco!" Now it was Lollipop's turn to give the other a playful shove. Smiling, Taco couldn't help but chuckle as she held her own umbrella away from her.

"Watch it," she said with a grin. "You're gonna make me drop this!"

"I say it's well deserved."

"Oh, shut up!"

The two women would continue to bicker ever so playfully, their smooth laughter washing within the rain that pelted through the air. It was incredibly cheesy- painfully cheesy, even- and Gelatin couldn't help but shake his head.

"Gross," Gelatin rolled his eyes. "I think I prefer being melted by the rain here."

"That explains why you're sitting here like some sort of wet cat..." Quickly, Lollipop couldn't stop her smile as Gelatin gave her a glare of annoyance- though it quickly melted into a smile, letting a soft chuckle rise from his throat.

"You got me," he replied, looking back up at the two. "But please, continue your little gay grocery run, so I can be spared from the horrors of your love story here."

Now that should have been enough to make the two leave. It usually worked with the others when he responded; it was always playful and never carried any malcontent, but for now, he simply wished to return to the quiet sounds of nature.

Lollipop couldn't help but notice as he would mindlessly reach to his wrist, rubbing the horrific scar that looped around it. Such a small gesture, one that was unconsciously made by the other, though it was enough to make her own smile dim.

"Tell us," she began. "What brings you out to the center of this abandoned city?"

"It isn't really abandoned if you think about it. I mean- we live here now," Gelatin avowed, flexing his own fingers. His remark resulted in a half-hearted eye roll from the purple lollipop.

"Alright, smart guy. Whatever you say. Though, it would be-"

"I just needed some time outside."

Stunned, Lollipop would look down, placing a hand on her hip from the measly response. "Time outside- during a rainstorm?"

"Listen, I thought I'd make it back before the rain even started!"

Taco shook her head. "That's just how storms are, jelly-dude."

"I know, but- man, I don't know. I just went for a walk, tried to visit a friend, until it started pouring down," he explained, bouncing off of the ground. "I forgot my umbrella, and I would not like to fall apart into a pile of mush the moment I step inside the house."

"Glad to find another object who can't handle the rain," Lollipop sighed.

Silence. No words came from the three, seconds passing by as they took in the sounds of the rainfall around them, with Gelatin leaning against the wall of the shop, and Taco gently tapping her foot in a rain puddle beside her, getting lost in the ripples of each tap. As for Lollipop, she found herself gazing at the jello's scars once more, becoming lost in her own thoughts about the matter.

Although the rumors existed, she couldn't help but let curiosity take hold of her. None of them had the slightest understanding as to what had happened to the others, but she found herself hoping; hoping that whatever he had gone through, was quick. Painless.

That scar on his chest said otherwise.

Looking over, Taco frowns as she notices the worried look on Lollipop's face. She reached over, letting her hand carefully brush into the free hand of her partner and letting her fingers blanket over hers, giving it a reassuring squeeze. This brings the woman back from her maze of thoughts, and instead, she clears her throat.

"Well, there'd be no use in staying out here alone, would there?" Lollipop called, carefully tilting her umbrella to the side. Gelatin's head lifted at the sound of her voice, watching as she would lift her hand from Taco's hold, extending it towards him.

"..I mean. The storm could pass soon! I don't mind staying," he said, rubbing the back of his own hand. Gosh- mere moments ago, he was sitting here, trapped by the rainstorm with no way of getting back on time. Now, he didn't bother to try and leave once he had the chance?

Sighing, she waved her hand towards him. "I'm offering to help you home, here."

"What about your groceries?"

"We can survive eating ramen for one more day."

"Taco??" Gelatin would turn towards the other woman, worried that she'd object to the offer. To his surprise, she shook her head.

"Trust us- we don't care. Besides, maybe then you'll remember to bring an umbrella next time!" Taco giggled, adjusting her own umbrella. "Besides- you're our neighbor. And Lolli here wanted to try and help you guys a little more- she won't ever say it out loud, but when she cares, she cares."

"Was that necessary?" Lollipop pouted, flustered by her words. Taco nodded, giving her a loving smile as she patted her lover's arm with ease.

"You'll thank me later, hun."

"Ugh- just get over here."

Gelatin couldn't help but blink. He had seen these two countless times before- from the moment he was recovered, to the moments where he'd caught a glimpse of them outside. He still recalled the one night where he and Lollipop had seen each other in the dead of night through the safety of their own homes.

And despite the pompous attitude that the purple lollipop had now, he remembered the sympathy that shined from her face that night.

His hand began to reach out. Despite this, he was still hesitant. How couldn't he be? The monster of terror lay dormant within his soul, moments away from being reawakened and sending him back to the damned nightmares that plagued his mind before. Being back in action helped him adjust to the city's environment once more, that's for sure- but his trust was still on the edge.

Were they being honest? Did they really want to help him?

Was there a motive these two had?

Would this be another lie he would fall for?

Lollipop noticed the way his hand would flinch, slowly recoiling from the two. She can immediately tell that something was happening in that brain of his- so she wastes zero time to help calm him.

"We mean no harm here," she reassured. "We want to get you back home- remember, we're right next door. Better than being soggy from the rain, is it not?"

Just a few words, and it was enough to nullify the fear that was beginning to rise in Gelatin's soul. He couldn't tell how, but he could hear the honesty from her voice alone, assuring him that it was nothing to be afraid of.

It was in the past. All of it- now, he was back in action. Everyone had the chance to move on.

And dammit, he wasn't going to miss that chance.

His shivering eased as his hand then reached over towards hers, a small smile growing on his face. Seeing that he had accepted her help, Lollipop couldn't stop the returning smile on her end...

...before she shoved the umbrella into his hand, carefully taking Taco's and keeping both herself, and her lover dry.

"You're in charge of that now. If you break it- you owe me a new one."

"As the prophecy foretold..." Gelatin whispers, his eyes twinkling while he held the umbrella carefully in his hands.

Taco couldn't stop herself from snickering at his words. Holding onto Lollipop's hand, she watched as the taller object would raise her eyebrow curiously at the man's gesture.

"I don't think that's-"

Gelatin raised the umbrella into the sky, shouting over Lollipop's

words. "Ya hear that, rain?! You won't keep me down! Not THIS time!"

Through the walk, he would endlessly converse with the two, getting to know Taco more, and endlessly conversing with Lollipop about the many memories they had in the TLC.

The sounds of the rainfall soon mixed with their sound of laughter, and for once, he began to feel like his old self once more.

Watching the three walk through the rain, Teardrop would brush her hand against the curtain, being sure to stay hidden from their line of sight.

There was something about them, something about the way they spoke towards one another- even taking in their surroundings in a way that seemed so... peaceful.

It allured Teardrop. Something was telling them to go after the group, to get to know them even more.

But there they stayed. Shivering from hunger, she couldn't help but hold her mouth instinctively as hunger pangs reminded her of her decreasing diet. She swore it wasn't on purpose- their nausea preventing them from keeping anything down.

A voice would then catch them off guard. "Teardrop?"

They looked back, a small smile blossoming on their face. Teardrop would wave with a careful movement, watching as Needle would walk over her, kissing the top of her head before handing her a fizzing glass of Goiky Ale.

Needle managed to find the on-brand ginger ale, thankfully. Teardrop was getting sick of Yoyle-Dry.

Teardrop would take quiet sips, sighing weakly as the knots in their

stomach would slowly fizz with the foam of the ale. She couldn't stop herself from turning and giving her lover a kiss on the lips, melting into the gentle warmth of her embrace.

Seeing Needle never failed to take her mind off of the troubles that drowned her, and she couldn't help but thank the universe for having someone as lovely as her.

Yet, there was something tugging at her chest. And when she looked back towards the window, the three had long vanished.

After a few knocks, the door before me swings open, and I stare into the sullen eyes of Blocky.

He recognizes me. Which is funny- because I'm starting to forget who I am myself.

Slowly. But surely.

It's jarring to see the dark circles under his eyes, faint tear stains trailing over them before falling beneath his face. I could feel the heaviness in his stare, crushing me like a bag of boulders.

Tears? There was no way Blocky could cry. He had his moments where his softer side came through, whether it was with friends or Grassy himself- but tears?

No. Don't act stupid. I know what I've done.

Seconds pass, and neither of us say a single word to each other. In fact,

his eyes narrow, as if he were reading the secrets that were buried deep within my soul. I consider stepping away, but the voice keeps my feet planted on the footsteps of the home.

"What do you want." His voice shattered the silence, deep, trembling, almost dangerous. It's enough to freeze the concoction of responses that float aimlessly in my brain.

I'm taken aback when the words escape the tip of my tongue, "I... just wanted to come by to see how the search on Grassy was going. I-"

"Grassy? Did somebody see him?!"

In the blink of an eye, I see Basketball rush to the door, with Robot Flower quickly following her. She's in a similar state to Blocky- but instead of exhaustion, her eyes are wide awake with worry and fear. Behind her, Snowball nearly shoves her out of the way, quickly leaning over to see who was at the door.

I have to wonder if his worry made him look a little sweeter. For a moment, I find it hard to believe that Snowball would show any ounce of empathy.

But it was her influence. It was.

It had to be.

Their eyes darken as they realize that the one they're looking for isn't at the door. Instead, Basketball shakes her head, giving me a panicked smile before greeting me; Snowball shoots me a glare, not bothering to leave.

"What brings you here..?" she says, her voice watered down from disappointment.

"Well," I begin. "I heard that Grassy went missing- I'm really sorry about-"

"So you're just coming by to rub it in our FACES?!!" Snowball's yell slices through my words. I quickly shake my head, holding the platter in my hands close.

"No! Nothing like that! I-I-"

"None of you were supposed to know about this.." Robot Flower exclaims, worriedly approaching me. "We didn't want you all to panic!"

"Guys, she's MOCKING us!"

"Shut UP, SNOWBALL!"

My eyes return to Blocky, and suddenly, he loses his cool. "ENOUGH!"

It all goes quiet once more, despite the glares that Robot Flower and Snowball exchanged towards one another. Blocky sighs, before turning back to me, his anger replaced with frustration. "What the hell do you want."

"I just wanted to tell you guys how sorry I am about Grassy," I rushed to say, afraid that someone would stop me from speaking once more. "I can't imagine how stressed you all must be- so, I made you something to eat, to try and take something off of your plate..."

For a moment, they stare at me, stunned. But when I carefully hold out the tray of cake in my hands, their eyes darkening with sadness once more.

"Well.. uh.. Thanks, I guess," he murmurs, slowly taking the tray from my hand. "Can't believe I forgot to make dinner.."

"Dinner?" Snowball pouts. "What time is it?"

"9-ish..?" I answer. The four look at each other, before Robot Flower speaks. "Actually- 9:34:06 pm."

Blocky's eyes widened. "Already?!"

"It's past his bedtime.." Instantly, Basketball begins to lose her cool, tears beginning to flood her eyes. She tried stepping away, but I could spot the droplets trailing down her grief-stricken face. The robot would quickly rush to her side, leading her to the sofa while Snowball silently grabbed some plates.

"Cmon'," he uttered. "Might as well get our fill before we start looking."

"Good idea." Blocky nods, leaving the door and helping the two get their

servings. For a moment, Robot Flower looks at me, and I turn away, embarrassed at the realization that she couldn't eat.

A fact that I forgot.

I thought I remembered.

I wish I could.

Soon, they each had their respective slices, and I begin to wonder how long they had gone without eating; they scarfed down the entirety of their cake, nearly forgetting that I was even there. I would have said something, if it weren't for Snowball- who, after finishing his slice, began to discuss ways of finding the kid, all while reaching over for his- jeez, his third slice? Whatever.

"Let me know if there's anything I can help with..." I say. No one answers, except for Blocky, who gives me a half-hearted nod.

'So...He's next, huh?'

"Yes."

'Great move, darling. We need to get the strongest out first- stun that scientist down to a grieving mess... we'll have our garden in no time~'

I begin to make my way back as they continue to eat, soon returning to the conversation about their missing son. For a moment, I look back, and watch as Blocky took a bite of the dessert, a chunk of it plopping onto the tray.

That's when I see the sliced fragment of Grassy's eyeball, before the frosting melted over it once more.

The voice was right.

Grassy's flesh did bake well with the oranges.

He looks down, using his hands to pick the piece up and pop it into his mouth. And that's when I leave, quietly closing the door behind me.

'Look's like the kid is doing well... our garden is flourishing- and those legs

of his really gave his family some nice protein. Good touch with the eye there...'

I giggle before I even realize it.

I wrote this during a panic attack. It helps me ground myself

Also yes, I know Liy isn't in idfb- this is my au and therefore she is now here.

And Balloony and Cloudy are indeed gay but they are painfully unaware of it.

Ok... enough clarifications. I'm starting to record myself reading Fear Garden 1- not sure where I'll upload it but I know people have been asking for an audiobook for a while now. My guess would be youtube but people are ruthless. But, I figured it was time for me to make one. Do keep in mind, I'm doing this all on my own, so uh. Yeah.

Wish me luck voicing everyone (especially fries. and bracelety. and puffball. Chat im cooked)

That's enough of me rambling, be thankful because this was 12k words!

Seeya

-Ice

Tired of Losing You

He's not here, either...

Snowball stared at the empty house before him, his hands curling into tightened fists.

His train of thought spirals. Grassy- someone who made his life better than it already was- had been missing for three days now, and despite his own efforts, nothing could be found of the kid.

What made it worse was that the memory of the kid consumed him. Grassy's voice whispered in the back of his mind, always making the colder object look aimlessly around the area, swearing that he heard him nearby.

Hours upon hours of searching drained him, he refused to admit it- but until that little bundle of grass was found, safe and sound, he could let himself relax.

The first ray of light cracked over the horizon, and Snowball's unease made the world spin. The city is too massive to cover in a few days. Abandoned buildings that carried haunted stories of the past makes the search harder; he has to look in and out, around every corner and under every table.

Yet, he still trails down the sidewalk, deeper and deeper into the abandoned city that seems to grow with every step he took.

Exhausted, hungry, and frustrated, he doesn't dare try to stop his search. He makes his way onto an abandoned park, silently peering into the snaking tubes of the slides before the sound of a snapping twig makes him turn.

To his disappointment, Basketball had run into him.

"Find anything yet?" Snowball asked, making his way towards the orange sports ball. He didn't acknowledge her tear-stained cheeks, even as she shook her head.

"No..." Basketball murmured. "I've looked everywhere."

A response that made Snowball's blood go cold. For a second, his brutish expression drooped into that of mere sorrow, before clenching his teeth, blinking away the terror that crawled up his soul. "Oh my flake. We need to speed this up!"

"I know we do, Snowball! But I have responsibilities- I-"

"What, Grassy isn't a responsibility?" He scoffed. Basketball's eyes widened, instantly putting her foot down to try and ease the hidden nerves of the ball of snow.

"Of COURSE he is!" She began, "i-I just- we can't let the others find out about this!"

The others. Oh, how sick Snowball was when it came to the others. The fact that he had been surrounded by a bunch of weaklings in the TLC was enough to make his mind melt. Of course, he had his friends by his side to fill that darkened atmosphere with casual conversations, but besides his friends, Grassy was someone that helped him through that grueling period, keeping him sane from beating the others up.

When they finally managed to break free and bring back the others, Snowball was ready to experience the joys that freedom had to offer. He could finally knock people's lights out- whenever they got on his nerves! He could do whatever he wanted, go anywhere he desired, continuing to work out so he could keep his title as the strongest object in Yoyle City.

Instead, he was faced with the realization that they had become JUST as weak as the armless losers in the city.

So many rules to live by. So many things to be careful of- he was getting sick and tired of it.

Clenching his fists, he would point towards Basketball. "Those

weaklings that died?!" He snapped. "Who cares about how they feel, if we're going to find Grassy, we need all the help we can get!"

"Snowball, they're all still terrified!" Basketball could feel the scathing lava of rage erupting from her soul, her face soon contorting into a scowl as she continued. "They're going to flip if they find out that Tree and Grassy are missing!"

"We'll only get more help for the search. They just need to suck it up."

"If you knew what I had to see for MYSELF, you'd know."

"Psh- TB's just a weak armless loser here. Whatever happened to him was well deserved."

The mention of her own cousin made her heart drop. Memories of Tennis Ball flickered in Basketball's mind, her heart shivering when she recalled the sounds of his terrified screams when he was awoken by a sudden nightmare.

"Enough!" Basketball's yell shattered the silence around them. "Can you just shut up?!"

"Make me!"

Watching the smirk grow on Snowball's face made Basketball's heart race, each beat reverberating through her body whilst her eyebrows scrunched together. She never understood how someone like this could care for someone like Grassy; there was no doubt that he would often get the little guy into trouble, but seeing how cruel he could truly be only cemented her anger towards him.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't wrap her head around it; Snowball was there that day. He watched these recoveries happen- didn't their screams and cries disturb him? Upset him? In any way possible?

It did for her.

Even long after the recoveries, she'd be working away in the lab, whilst TB and GB would get their rest in one of their little rooms down the hall, and before GB's Zelatonin had bloomed into existence,

there wasn't a singular day where she wasn't startled by the panicked screams of her cousin (as well as his partner).

Imagining what they had gone through wasn't possible.

Basketball would try her best to help her cousin because of this; PTSD was something she had never seen within her own family. Yet, her cousin, alongside his friends, were now riddled with its damaging effects, and there was only so much she could do to help.

Thankfully, the others seemed to express their condolences, doing everything they could to keep things calm in the city, even helping their recovered neighbors with any chore that was needed. This served as a relief for Basketball, with there being a collective group effort to help ease their way back into existence.

Not everybody could be as empathetic, unfortunately. And this brute staring in front of her was a Grade-A example of it.

Before she could even snap, a voice broke through the atmosphere between them.

"Guys, please..." Blocky grunted, rubbing his forehead as he approached the two. "Now's not the time to fight."

"Oh really? Says the guy who got Grassy into all sorts of trouble?!" Basketball snapped. His eyes immediately narrowed towards the orange sports ball, his hands lowering to his sides and balling into fists.

"I was just trying to help the kid have fun! Life in the city has been dreary Basketball, the kid doesn't deserve to grow up with traumatized idiots around him!"

"Idiots?! You encouraged him to wander and practice those STUPID funny doings of yours- because of that, he could be HURT, and it's all your FAULT!" The image of Grassy being hurt and desolate made tears fill Basketball's eyes, haunting her- hell, taunting her, almost. She clenched her teeth, shaking the thought out of its existence.

Scowling, Blocky pointed towards her. "MY FAULT?!" He shouted. "I wasn't the one who pushed him aside because I was busy being a LAB

RAT!"

There was no way she could hold herself back anymore. From the stress, the exhaustion, the desperation of finding Grassy safe and sound- it was overwhelming her, causing her to scream right back at the wooden block. "I'M IN CHARGE OF BUILDING THESE RECOVERY CENTERS, BLOCKY! YOU BOTH DO NOTHING BUT CAUSE TROUBLE AND LAZE AROUND ALL DAY!"

Before the men could respond, another object approached them. Alerted by the sound of a snapping twig, or a sudden change in the atmosphere, the three turn around on high alert.

Pen and Eraser, both covered in dust from the search, approach the group with each step they take. Pen's hand is interlocked with his lover, before his eyes greet the others, an eyebrow gradually raising in confusion.

"Who says we laze around?" He asked, pulling his hand away from Eraser's in order to brush himself off. "We're trying to help here!"

"Great! More idiots to have on the search, just perfect!" Basketball scoffed, rolling her dreary eyes.

Blocky wasted no time in snapping back. "Don't talk about my friends that way! They're HELPING here!"

"Helping us lose time, sure! I can hear their flirting from MILES away!"

The words were quick to make Pen frown, turning his head towards her. "Hey..."

If it weren't for the circumstances, perhaps Basketball would have apologized for her words. Confrontation wasn't her strongest point, with her hesitancy often overpowering any other emotion that resulted from any given situation.

But Grassy was missing. Tree was gone, and she pushed it all away.

Looking down, Basketball would fight away the tears in her eyes, taking in hushed breaths of air. Pen turned to face Eraser, but the

pink object would reach over, clearing his throat.

"We've looked by the factories- still no sign of him." Eraser uttered, cradling Pen's hand in his. "Was there any place he could have gone, or anything he told you before he left?"

"He wanted to play in the rain..."

Basketball's hushed words felt like blades piercing through Blocky's mind, his nails digging into the palm of his hands. He knew he should have taken him under his watch that day. Despite the work he had on his plate- he should have taken him too.

It was too much for the wooden block, lowering his face into the palms of his hands. He had to fight the sorrow that burned at the core of his chest, his lip quivering before his teeth clenched with frustration. There was no way he could blame Basketball for this; as snappy as she could be, he knew too well that this wasn't ever her intention.

Besides, her tear-filled eyes said otherwise. Basketball's eyes traveled through the abandoned park around them, silently hoping that something would appear, sooner than later. A hint, a clue, perhaps a mere footstep... anything to assure her son's safety.

Pen could only watch the three, yet, he couldn't help himself from glancing up at the now cloudless sky."

"Why the rain?" He spoke to himself. "The kid could've had his own pool made- you guys are scientists after all."

"Shut up, Pen." A robotic voice snapped. Trudging towards the three, Robot Flower crossed her arms towards Pen, causing him to flinch.

"Okay...."

Was there any possibility of programming him into shutting up?

Robot Flower knew there wasn't- after all, objects didn't have the same internal structures as she did- though, she couldn't help herself from glaring at the ink stick, wishing that he could learn some form of empathy.

Her glares were short-lived though, soon looking down as she felt Basketball nudging at her side. She wastes no time in giving her a hug, capturing the concern that radiated from her girlfriends eyes.

"Robot Flower- anything?" Basketball whispers. With a saddened shake of her head, the silence that followed said so little, yet revealed so much. The spike in Basketball's heart rate shattered the remaining peace within her very being, and much to her girlfriend's dismay, she broke away from her hold, frantically pacing back and forth."

"It's been days, Grassy's out there all by himself... w-what if he-"

"No- no, we AREN'T starting with those stupid thoughts." Snowball concurred, stomping towards her with a raised finger. "We just need more help- this city is massive, Grassy has to be in some old building or something!"

An idea that flashed a plethora of memories through Pen's mind. Frowning, he turned towards Snowball, hesitantly asking the question that rumbled through his thoughts.

"More help..? Won't that freak the others out?"

"I don't care! We need to tell them!"

Oh, Pen Factory, Pen thought to himself, shakily cradling his arms to his own chest.

They were going to have to tell them- all of them. Including his sister.

He had seen how she gets when anything reminds her of the massacre- even the slightest tug at her scarf was enough to make her breakdown, any stability crumbling before them.

Tree had gone missing after he had asked for help; no way would he risk anyone else's safety for this again.

But what could he do..? If they were going to tell them, what could they possibly-

Aha!

"Why don't we tell them in the form of a song! "We've got some missing objects, do-do-do, it's happening again, do-do-do, so let's look around to find them, so we can put an end to this nightmare!""

Snapping to the beat, Pen would playfully kick his legs to the song, nodding at the rhythm that looped around his mind. He could practically see it- no way would anyone be scared by this song! He smiled, soon turning back towards the group.

Much to his dismay, the others around him stared with a look of disbelief, quickly causing his enthusiasm to sink like a stone into the depths of guilt. Lowering his hands to his sides, he could only muster a weakened chuckle, causing Robot Flower to flick her middle finger into the center of his face.

But he paid no mind to it. He couldn't; there was something else that burned at his soul, something that made a shiver crawl up his spine. Pen would look around, his gaze locking onto that familiar wooden block; his closest friend.

That was it. That was all it took for him to make Blocky break, his eyes blazing with rage and frustration. His stupid smile fueled the wildfire through his body, and he snapped.

"Oh, you can't take ANYTHING seriously, can you." Blocky asked.

Confused, Pen's smile faltered, his hands lifting into the air defensively. "Haha- what?"

"For FUCKS SAKE PEN!" Blocky's expression burst into the boiling maroon of seething rage, his voice shattering through the worry that encapsulated his emotions. "WHY CAN'T YOU TRY AND KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT FOR ONCE IN YOUR LIFE?!"

Pen's stomach shattered at his friend's reaction. His shoulders would lower themselves, taking careful steps away from Blocky, who was now inching towards him.

"Woah- Blocky, I-"

A hand swung forwards, seizing Pen's shoulders and shaking them furiously. His terror kept him from yelling at the top of his lungs, but

before he could try and throw a punch, Blocky's hands pushed him back.

"YOU STOPPED ME FROM LOOKING- YOU MADE ME KILL A STUPID SPIDER WHILE GRASSY WAS BY HIMSELF!" The livid wooden block yelled, being tugged away by the group. "I FELT SOMETHING AND ALL YOU COULD DO WAS JOKE ABOUT IT!"

"BLOCKY!" Eraser's screams fell upon deafened 'ears', as Blocky continued to lash out at the ink stick, his fists quivering with unbridled anger. He stomped towards him, shoving him against the decaying slide with nowhere else to go.

All he could do now was beg for his own mercy.

"B-BLOCKY, PLEASE! I'M SORRY, I-"

"YOU THINK THIS IS SOME FUCKING GAME?! DO YOU?! MY SON IS MISSING! IF IT WEREN'T FOR YOU AND YOUR STUPID COMMENTS, I COULD'VE STOPPED IT FROM HAPPENING!"

Tears. There they were again- so foreign, yet so distasteful.

It had taken some time for Blocky to ease off of his usual demeanor- having to be the prankster of the group meant that his vulnerabilities would have to be hidden away somewhere, never to be looked upon by himself, or anyone around him. But as time progressed, he was easing away from the barriers he had created upon himself, not shying away from easing away from the brutish attitude he had adopted.

Now? It had been days. Days since Grassy's disappearance. Although his friends were by his side to help, it felt as if they were doing the exact opposite.

Before he could continue his angered tirade, Snowball yanked him back from the other, her hands tightening around Blocky's forearms. "ENOUGH!"

Hadn't it been for his intervention, Blocky would have let his punches teach a thing or two about empathy. Catching his breath, he would turn towards Snowball, placing a hand on his arm. As quickly as the

rage had come, it had vanished, leaving him stunned at the sudden explosion of anger.

Nobody spoke for, what felt like, hours. Managing to lift himself from the wall, Pen's body trembled with unease, stumbling into the concerned embrace of his boyfriend. His panicked breaths wavered through the air around them, his blue eyes fixed onto the ground, not daring to look anywhere else.

He wanted to bring some ease into the chaos. That was all.

The sudden brawl remained unaddressed by the group, until Pen cleared his throat, his hands clenched defensively.

"..Fine!" He uttered. "I guess you haters can look for yourselves- since all I do is cause trouble!"

His words stung like the damned wasps of realization. Blocky reached for him, hesitantly taking a step towards his friend before he stepped back.

"Pen-"

"Nope! You made it loud and clear!" Pen kept his line of sight away from his friend, not bothering to answer his pleas. He was still terrified- not wanting to get more hurt than he already was- and when he felt Eraser's hands resting on his shoulders, he quickly shrugged them off.

Eraser frowned. "Dude, wait-"

"You can stay Eraser. I.. I need to go."

Swiftly, he makes a run for it, covering his face with shame before vanishing behind the corner of a nearby building. The moment he sprinted away, Eraser turned to face the wooden block, his face riddled with concern. He reached out, placing a hand on his shoulder. "...Blocky-"

"I don't care." Blocky grunted. He turned his head to the side, not wanting to look at his friend after snapping at his lover, yet Eraser couldn't hold it against him. Giving his shoulder a reassuring squeeze,

he would let go, turning to run after his boyfriend.

"Pen, wait!"

His voice would fall into the grasp of silence, his frantic footsteps slipping away before the air around them returned to the hushed whispers of daybreak. Sunlight permeated through the streets of Yoyle City, waking the few remaining citizens and unclogging the minds of those that had been searching tirelessly.

For a while, the four stand there in silence, their minds wandering endlessly in order to delay the inevitable realization that clawed at their minds. Then Basketball spoke, the energy drained from her voice. "We're bad at this."

"..What should we do?" Robot Flower asks, her arms wrapping around her girlfriend with ease.

"Keep looking." Blocky replied lowly. His hands ball into fists, his breaths quickening as he tried to get his mind back into focus. "That's all we can do right now."

"More than that." Snowball declared. "We have the other TLC-ers here. Let's get their help."

"But what if they-"

"No! We're getting help!"

"Snowball.."

"The kid is out there, all by himself! He's got his survival skills- all thanks to ME- but he needs us! We can't leave him out there!"

For a moment, the four of them stand frozen, scanning through their mental maps of the city, the abandoned buildings, the parks and houses they had yet to explore. Then Basketball smirks, her eyes glaring towards Snowball with a knowing look.

This only angered the other male, causing him to glare right back at her. "What?!"

"Here I thought you didn't care about the kid.." She chuckled, letting herself lean into Robot Flower's hold. Clouds of blue blanketed over Snowball's face, embarrassed by the sudden reveal of his own weak side.

"O-Oh- Whatever! Let's just find the little weakling before it gets DARK! Now come ON!"

Hopefully that could be enough for her.

Clutching the empty bag close, Coiny would squint from the sunlight bearing down onto the city. He had forgotten how welcoming the spring equinox was, time becoming nothing more but a blur to him as he had spent every passing day inside.

There was no way she could try and make it out there. He knew it himself- he remembered how hesitant she was to let go of him that day.

He remembered telling her how he wanted to help her, in any way that he could.

Since then, he's kept that promise; gathering food, water, and any sort of supplies that he could get, storing them beneath familiar thickets that signified the deepest center of the woods. There was no way of knowing if she would come across them at first- but after two attempts, he remembered spotting the familiar red hue of Pin, dashing away from the spot with a water bottle falling from her hold.

That was weeks ago. He never had the courage to admit that Leafy and Firey's snacks and foods were vanishing due to him- but if anyone saw him leaving shops with bundles of food, they'd grow curious.

Did he wish to go off with her? To have a chance to put this all away? Of course.

But him vanishing would only lead to a panic. And there was no way he could be the cause of this once more.

He continued down the path, soon stepping onto the familiar pavement of the roads, before a sultry voice made him freeze.

"I was wondering where you've been." Fries uttered. He stepped towards him, carefully adjusting a large green bag in his arms, with Puffball peeking out from the top of his carton curiously.

Although he had spotted him from afar, he was curious to see what he had been up to during these times.

Startled, Coiny yelped, the empty bag fumbling out of his hold. Nobody was ever around when he returned from his little 'walk'- he left at such an hour to avoid being spotted by the others.

Now, being seen by Fries only made him stumble, pathetically trying to pick the bag up before clutching it tightly to his chest. A gesture that only made the saltier object raise an eyebrow.

"Going anywhere?" He asked. Coiny quickly shook his head.

"I-I dunno," He stuttered, pointing towards the two. "Were you going anywhere??"

Oh for tater's sake.

Fries shook his head, rubbing his forehead with a soft grunt of annoyance.

"You'd better be joking, Coiny." He uttered.

"I-I'm not!"

"Really."

"No- I-I mean, yes- I- UGH!"

The words come out of Coiny's mouth before he can stop them. His mind raced, from Pin's safety to his own hidden actions beginning to bleed onto the conversations of any average day. He had to keep this hidden; nobody knew that she was back, and he certainly did as much as he could to keep that hidden.

Now, here he was; looking like a fool in front of someone he hadn't spoken to in weeks. Despite Fries' reassurance on the day of their recoveries, the guilt that ate at his coppered mind was enough to alienate him from him, as well as the others. There wasn't a single hour that passed where he wouldn't find subtle reminders of his own failures.

Not giving a single damn about Firey while he was trapped in that cage.

Not stopping Pin from getting them all.

Not saving Fries...

Watching Coiny's eye's dim from the lively shimmer that they usually carried, Fries couldn't help but inch towards him, placing a hand on his shoulder. This only made the coin jump, stumbling back and leaving his own hand in the open.

Fries couldn't stop the concern that melted over his annoyed look. Hesitantly, his hand would fall back to his side, silently moving the bag towards his other arm with a heavy sigh.

Although he didn't speak, Puffball knew what he wanted to say. "Are you okay?" She asked, her melodic tone making Coiny sigh.

"As good as can be expected," he murmured, shrugging halfheartedly. "But how are you both doing..?"

"Well, we're here. That medicine GB made for us helped us get some sleep." Fries answers. He can almost hear the screams of his family from their awakening nightmares, but he's quick to push them away. "Things have been... a lot easier for us to handle."

Lifting herself up to peek more from the top of his carton, Puffball would smile. "Moreso for Fries. He's been getting actual rest for

once."

"And your nightmares haven't returned in a while..."

Smiling, Fries would lift a gentle hand towards his partner, letting his fingers sink into the softness of her fuzz. Immediately, Puffball would let herself relax, leaning into his touch with a quiet hum. Despite all of his work in his old garden, Fries's rough hands were always warm and careful, being enough to make the fuzzball melt affectionately at his touch.

Hearing her hums were enough to make a smile lift on Fries's face, a hushed love washing over him like the gentle waves from the ocean of endearment. The more time went by, the more they were able to heal, and now he found himself smiling at the comfort of his soulmate's presence.

Anxious thoughts and sleepless nights were finally dwindling. And for once, Fries felt as if he could finally see that sense of normalcy that was lost, so long ago.

With Puffball's quiet giggles and Fries's soft chuckles, Coiny couldn't stop himself from gagging at the sight. It was a halfhearted gesture- not as playful as he used to be- but he rolled his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest."

"So you're both recovering?" He asks. Fries glanced over, clearing his throat before pulling his hand away, much to Puffball's disappointment.

"Slowly, but surely." He replied, giving a reassuring smile towards the fuzzball. It was enough for her to settle, nuzzling the top of his head with careful movements that made his salted heart melt.

More affection? How cheesy could these two be? Coiny thought to himself, a playful smirk twitching on his face. He always recognized the bond that the two had, even before they had come to Yoyleland; no matter how chaotic things became, he would spot the tenderness that rose from Fries whenever Puffball was near.

Especially after her betrayal in BFDIA 5. That sure was a doozy.

..Perhaps he knew a thing or two about-

Wait.

That bag....

Immediately, his thoughts vanish as the familiar green and tan bag fell into his view. "...Is that.." He asked, his voice hushed from his own curiosity.

Fries blinked, his gaze quickly following Coiny's before they fell upon the bag underneath his own arm. A small smile lifts on his face. "I uh-... yeah... Tennis Ball finally got around to making these for me." He watched as Coiny glanced at the bag, then at the singular fry that sprouted from his own head.

"Fresh growtato seeds."

"Woah..."

"I asked if there was a way to get them to grow artificially, but TB told me that it wasn't possible. So, I have to start from scratch; gotta get my potato gar-" Fries flinched, quickly correcting himself. "Farm, back into shape."

"Oh man- it's been so long since you've made some..!"

Coiny's stifled laugh at the statement made Fries squint, carefully holding the bag away from the other. "Coiny."

"Whaat?? It's been ages, Fries!"

"And?"

" "And"?! We could totally try and make some for everyone! I'm sure the TLC-er's would love to taste some of those! Man- I've missed their taste since the last time you made them..."

"No way." Puffball interrupted, pouting with the shake of her head. "We're going to make sure they grow completely- THIS time."

This time?

What did she mean by-

Oh.

Coiny flinched, the memories soon filling his mind from the gaping void that was vacant from the days before the killings. He remembered how excited he was to first try them, the day that Fries was finally beginning to plant them.

He also remembered how badly he wanted to try one.

And then, he recalled eating a few of them, much to Fries's dismay.

"Hey!" Huffing, Coiny would raise his hand, playfully waving it at their faces. "I wasn't as bad as Gelatin was, he ate a bunch of them!"

"...Well, He's not wrong." Puffball added, resulting in a laugh from Coiny.

All three of them soon found themselves laughing, quietly recalling the wild antics that the two would commit, all to try and get a taste of those damned growtato's. It was enough to make the poor guy build a fence around his garden, trying to keep any hands from destroying his hard work.

Yet, as Coiny's laughter died down, he couldn't help but think back to the barren land that now stood behind Fries's home. The ghostly post that he had left behind tugged at his memories, bringing him back to the day where his family had fallen apart.

"Speaking of," he began, looking back. "How is Gelatin doing? It's been a while since I've seen him.."

"Since you've seen anyone, actually. You have to start going outside." Puffball teased. Coiny squinted, sticking his tongue out at the giggling fuzzball before Fries let out a sigh.

"Well, he's been doing better."

"Really?"

"Yep. He's beginning to smile a lot more now- actually starting to

shift back into his own self, even after she-..." Fries would then stop, his words trailing into the void at the memory.

Right.

He still couldn't find it in himself to even think about her.

Could he.

The peaceful smile that painted over Fries's face slowly wilted into a frown, much like a dying flower in a rotting bush of joy. Memories would swing in and out, teasing him of the woman he had gotten to know for so long; hell, the woman he came to care about so deeply, only for her to throw it all away.

It made his heart sink.

Coiny stared, frowning as that sense of tranquility vanished from the two. He couldn't help himself from looking at his eyes, and it was there when he could see it all. The anger, the betrayal, the despair- but, the melancholy, the sadness, a longing and worry he had for Pin.

He didn't want to think about it, at first. Yet, this was enough of a confirmation for Coiny.

He cared.

He still cared.

Before he could have the chance to ask, Fries would clear his throat, hoisting the bag over his shoulder with a soft grunt. His eyes would blink rapidly, forcing these emotions back into the core of his soul while he turned away.

"I-... have to go." He whispered.

Puffball frowned, looking down towards her partner with concern. "Fries-"

"No, Puffball. This farm isn't gonna start itself."

"But-"

"We'll see you around, Coiny."

"Wait!" Coiny stumbled forward, pressing his hands to his chest. Any time for speaking had vanished, but he had to say something. He couldn't leave it to rest. And even if he had promised to keep this secret from the others, it wouldn't excuse the silence he had today. "Wait, please."

Stiffly, Fries would turn around, his narrowed eyes staring down at the shorter object. "What?"

"I-I just- wanted to ask you.. uh.."

"Ask me what."

He didn't know where to start. But once he did, the words erupt like an active volcano, spewing from the thoughts he had carried for a long time.

"..It's about Pin."

...

"..Right. Listen Coiny, I have a lot to do, so I need you to-"

"Fries, come on! You can't hide from this, I-.. I need to know what you think!"

"What I think?!" Fries's voice rose, shooting thorns of guilt straight through Coiny's soul.

This wasn't meant to be something that'd hurt them. No way did he want to try and shatter the peace that they had just found, but he had grown so reclusive with these thoughts, that they were starting to weigh himself down.

He needed to talk to someone. Anyone.

And with a single glance, Coiny could tell that he still had a glimmer of care towards her too.

Despite his efforts, Coiny found himself tottering through eggshells,

doing everything he could to keep himself from striking Fries's nerves.

"She cared about you, Fries. There's no one else who I can talk to about this, a-and I need to know how you-"

"Coiny, STOP." Fries interrupted through gritted teeth. "I don't want to continue this conversation."

"But Fries-"

"I SAID, STOP!"

"I just-"

"LEAVE. Just... Leave us alone."

Swiftly, Fries would turn away, wincing at the soreness of his shoulders. He rolled them slightly, cracking audibly with every move he made in order to ease the tension from his pain.

Yet, Coiny's eyes glared at the two. He was tired- tired of having to carry these emotions all on his own. There was no way he was going to miss this chance now.

He finds the words leaving his mouth before he can think. "..Didn't you care about her..?!"

Silence.

Looking up, Coiny watched as Fries's movements immediately stopped. His legs were now planted against the pavement of the sidewalk, his fingers shakily digging into the bag of growtato seeds, slowly turning back to face him.

The look of scorn on Fries's face was enough of a response to Coiny, yet he shook his head.

"You were CLOSE to her!"

"Yeah, WAS close to her." Fries snapped. "Until she literally stabbed me in the BACK!"

"She what..?!"

Horrified, Puffball quickly looked down, her mouth agape as she desperately tried to find a response towards the statement.

She knew that Fries was still learning how to open up- slowly, yet surely- as hours of conversations would keep the memories at bay. Puffball was the one to start them, of course, but gradually, Fries would begin to speak as well, finally having a chance to unearth those fears that haunted his every waking moment.

Since then, he had laid it all to rest. Peace was becoming familiar to him, and that hidden terror was fading away from his tainted soul.

Fries never told her how she died, though.

Those scars on his back and chest always told her everything she needed to know. Despite this, she yearned to hear the truth from Fries, to give him a chance to let it out, to feel the relief of having this weight lifted from his aching shoulders.

But he never told her.

And she was left in the dark. Yet again.

Surprised, Fries would look up. Just from the look of betrayal and horror on her face, he could feel his heart sinking into the pit of his stomach, and he frowned.

"Ah-.. Puffball, I-"

"You didn't tell me this..!?" She whispered. He quickly shook his head.

"I didn't want to, there was no point in doing so!"

"Fries, I told you that you could open up about this to me- I asked you to!"

"I know, I-"

"I asked you to let things out, I wanted to help you through this, I-I

wanted to know what she did so you could feel some sort of relief! But instead you just- ignore me..? You... toss me aside..?"

Fries's heart cracked at the sound of Puffball's voice. The way it had fallen underneath a blanket of sadness, hushed by her own fears of being completely forgotten about, despite her attempts to prevent it.

Quickly, he shakes his head, frowning as she quickly pulls her face away from the palm of his hand.
"No Puffball, no!" Fries claimed, "I-I just- everything was going on, I-"

"Why couldn't you see my offer to help you..? Am I not enough..?"
"NO."

Immediately, his hands would firmly press against Puffball's shivering body. She flinched, the sudden exclamation throwing her train of thought off of its path, before glancing downwards, fighting the tears that stung at the corners of her eyes.

Reassurance glowed from Fries's eyes, even as she locked onto them. His firm hold kept the two in silence, the tension dissipating into thin air before Fries took a deep breath.

"Listen to me Puffball," he began, "You were always enough- more than enough- to me."

"..I-.." She frowned as a tear managed to snake down his face.

"I just- I only want to move on from everything that happened."

"You did..?"

Fries nodded. "I never wanted to linger on those memories. There was no point to- it... only made me want to shut myself in, and keep you and Gelatin out of danger."

"Fries.."

"I don't want to hold anyone back anymore. I want you all to heal and move on, but-... god.." He shut his eyes, forcing himself to silence the memories that filled his veins with fear. "...moving on from what she did.. will help me heal. Besides, it's not like I'm not used to back

pain."

"...I'm sorry.."

Her whisper was enough to make him look up.

Those twinkling eyes of hers. Filled with so much love; pleading, almost. Fries never found himself defying that look of hers. He sighed, letting his hand lift and caress the side of her face.

"No. I'm sorry..." he reassured, gently placing his hand on the side of her face. "You were only looking out for me. I shouldn't have shut myself out like that.."

Puffball let her head tilt downwards, nuzzling the top of his head gently as he let the words sink into the atmosphere. She smiled softly when she felt the tension dissipate around them, leaning into his palm with every caress he gave.

They stayed that way, silently reassuring one another, before Fries turned towards Coiny, his eyes darkened with the mist of exhaustion.

"I know this probably isn't easy for you, either." He sighed, rubbing the back of his head.

"It isn't," Coiny mumbled. "because I know what she did. I feel too much, even as I'm still trying to wrap my head around why."

"..It doesn't matter why."

"What..?!"

"She still did what she did, and you have to accept that eventually." Fries's tone had fallen into a deadpan murmur, making a twinge of anger strike at Coiny's mind.

He was trying to hide how he felt. He knew he was.

"You say that, like she never meant anything to us." He shouted, his fists clenched. "Like she didn't care about us as much as we cared about her."

"That scar on your chest says otherwise."

Coiny's heart froze, then shattered. He felt like his scarred wounds were ripped open, the tears of the past oozing down with a crimson hue.

It was enough to make Coiny clutch at the scar over his own chest, tenderly brushing his hand against it until he let the warmth of his palm melt into the permanent mark on his body.

"She wasn't the one to give me it." He whispered. Confused, Puffball's eyes would jump between his hands and his face, peeking up once more to speak.

"What do you mean?" She asked, worry shining in her multicolored eyes. "Was there someone else?"

Silence. Coiny lowered his head, delicately clutching his scar with his trembling fingers. The look in his eyes was enough to force the curiosity away from Puffball, but to Fries, he couldn't wrap his head around it.

He was there. He remembered seeing him, right before he was killed.

How could anyone else have-

....

No one... but...

Him.

The realization was too much for him to bear. He had always seen Coiny as a member of the family- to Fries's own dismay, of course. Hours upon hours of him pestering him about his old growtato farm was enough to exasperate the poor guy.

But in the end, he kept the silence at bay. The loneliness. And realizing that he had killed himself in the wake of his lover's terrors, crushed his spirit, destroying him from the remaining fragments of peace he carried. He reached for the coin-creature, but he turned away, leaving Fries to watch helplessly.

As Coiny walked away from the two, he lets his mind vanish into the clouds of his own imagination. He pictures a world, one within the future, with no anger, no nightmares, nothing. In this world, he sees himself in a vast green field, the song of his friend's voices filling his mind.

In this world, Smiling faces greet him, left and right. Lovers intertwine, friends embrace. Some run around, while others sit and chat.

In this world, Pin is amongst them, safe, and free. Familiar seeds cradled in the palms of her hands.

He clenched the bag, his eyes dimming as he drearily made his way back home, going the opposite direction of his Pin's path.

"Hey there, stranger."

The squeaky voice made Book jump, her mind going blank from the whirlwind of thoughts she found herself in. Her usual stroll through the city was caught off guard, yet it wasn't enough to fill her heart with unease.

Book would turn to face the two, a small smile curving up on her face. "Bomby! Nickel- oh my word, you scared me!"

"Oh dagnabbit!" Nickel exclaimed with a frown. "We're so sorry, we didn't mean to-"

"N-No, no! It's okay!"

"Are you sure?? You looked like you were really out of it there.." Bomby asked. His hands would rub his own wrists every now and then, his fingers clenching the gnarly scar he had gained since his

own recovery.

Such a simple gesture, one that would surely pass over anybody's mind. But for Book, she couldn't help but watch, her smile fading at the gesture.

She knew that the three were on a journey during Pin's rampage. She was one of many who wished them luck beforehand, giving them a handful of advice when it came to traveling beyond the city.

The last time she had seen them was when they began their trek through the woods. And when she saw them again, those scars screamed with the bitter reminder; nobody was spared from Pin's wrath.

Her cover was painted with them, after all. Scar after scar from that... shredder...

....

"Book?"

Nickel's voice quickly snapped Book back to reality. Shaking her head, she gave the five-cent denomination (don't.) a crooked smile, rubbing the back of her cover hesitantly.

"Sorry," She sighed, "I spaced out a little, heh.."

"Psh, come back to Earth, space cadet." Giving her a playful nudge, Book couldn't stop the smile that appeared on her face, with Nickel giving her his usual beaming grin in return.

It had been ages since she had the chance to be with the two. For a second, Book could feel her worries dissipating into the atmosphere, the memories of the past falling dormant with a ray of light shimmering through the space it left behind. Bomby would look down, his arm resting on the top of his boyfriend's head, as he spoke.

"Where are you headed off to?"

"I just went to take a walk." Book stated, kicking a small pebble. She watched as it tumbled down the street. "Turns out, Yoyle City has a

huge bookstore- Barnes & Yoyle..."

"Barnes & Yoyle?!"

"Yeah!"

"What DOESN'T exist in Yoyle City?" Exclaimed Nickel, happily bouncing in front of his boyfriend's path. "This place is like a goldmine!"

"It's more of a ghost town, to me..."

"At least there's a bunch of gnarly stuff left behind!"

"Gnarly? More like garbage..."

"Hey! Value is in the eye of the beholder, Book!" Nickel exclaimed, pacing in front of the two with his head tilted upwards. "Some things may be a gazillion years old- but they're just as good as new!"

For weeks now, Book had grown used to the bitter feeling of loneliness. Each passing day served as nothing more than a reminder to the world she had returned to, with the past following her through every room she traveled to, its cackling echoing through her crinkled pages. But now that she had found her way back to a few old friends, the feeling of hope nearly threw her off her guard.

It had become foreign. Unfamiliar, even. Living each day on autopilot led to lost time; instead of living freely and embracing the newest chance of life she had, she rotted in her room, only leaving to cook (at least, with the little ounce of energy she had).

She was so sure she'd lose. With her spiraling mental health, the fight to survive was dwindling; now, seeing Nickel's smile and Bomby's welcoming attitude was the push she needed to try and...

Move on..?

...Was it... alright... to move on?

Book sighed. "Well, now you know what I've been up to. Tell me- what are you two doing out here?"

"We're on our way to get some grub!" Smiling, Nickel would let his disc-shaped body lean against Bomby's side, melting as he wrapped an arm around him. "We kinda ran out of food in the hotel."

"The hotel?"

"Duh- the Live Hotel!"

Now Book was sure she was starting to live under a rock. She raised her eyebrow, puzzled by the words that Nickel had told her.

"What's the Live Hotel?"

Shocked, the little coin whirled around, revealing his widened eyes. "You haven't heard of the hotel?!"

"No...?"

"Drats!" He stomped his foot. "Bomby, we gotta tell her about it!"

Chuckling under his breath, Bomby would wave his hand towards Book, letting her follow as the three made their way through the abandoned city. The shorter woman was hesitant, unsure if he was telling her to buzz off, but one nod was enough to reassure her as she quickly walked after the two.

"Naily was the one to tell me this," he began, a smile on his face. "But when the TLC-er's finally barged out, they were too tired to try and find their own places to stay. Luckily, someone came across this huge hotel that's near the town square!"

Book nodded, letting her fingers lock with one another. "I assume that it's called the Live Hotel?"

"Yep!"

"It's pretty swell, too!" Nickel interrupted, butting in between the two excitedly. "All the rooms are nifty- some are a little worse for wear, but it's nothing that we can't fix!"

"And you said that- everyone is there..?"

"Mostly everyone. There are a few that chose to live in their own places, but the majority of the group chose to stay there." Bomby responded, thoughtfully counting off the faces he had encountered while living there with a flick of each finger. Book watched him, analyzing the way he counted, before shaking her head.

"It sounds fun.." She replied, dejectedly. Nickel was quick to pick up her tone, a noticeable pout forming on his shining face.

There was something up. He could tell, just from the way she was acting- but he couldn't exactly tell. He could try and ask to see what was going on, yet, the scars that etched through her entire body was enough of a warning to not do so.

Instead, he taps his foot, his eyes shifting from side-to-side, until a lightbulb switches on, quickly brightening his mind with the ray of a brilliant idea.

"I've got it!" He exclaimed, much to his friend and boyfriend's shock. "Why don't you come over sometime?"

"W-Wait- me?" Book sputtered, weakly pointing to herself as Bomby nodded enthusiastically.

"Oh my gosh- that'd be a great idea! We could have a sleepover!"

"Even BETTER! You're a genius, Bomby!"

"Thank you!"

The sound of their laughter swirled around Book, filling the atmosphere with an uplifting hush. It mixed with the breeze, gently swaying her tattered pages that stuck out from her being, yet the sun permeated through her soul, embracing her in a comforting, warm hold.

For once, nothing seemed too bitter. The world around her somehow became brighter.

It was enough to make a genuine smile glow from Book's scarred cover.

"O-Okay! Count me in!"

Cheering, Nickel would happily nudge the woman, trailing down the path before turning back to face them. Bomby smiled, shaking his head as he excitedly made his way after him, with Book going after them.

"Alright gang!" He exclaimed, quickly marching his way forwards. "Ready to rock and-"

"OUT OF MY WAY, LOSER!"

WHAM.

The waters of serenity that Book had finally begun to wade through vanished, becoming nothing more than a mist of horror, as she watched Snowball's fist plummet against Nickel's cheek with a hard crack. Immediately, the smaller object is sent flying to the ground, silence seeping into the dead air that was left by the impact.

Bomby's smile had fallen into a frown of terror. Seeing the ball of snow towering over the group didn't stop him from scrambling to Nickel's side, worriedly hoisting him into the safety of his arms.

Words. Words, words, words. Whatever they were saying to each other morphed into an ear-piercing ring, as Book's eyes were locked onto Snowball, mentally flipping through the pages of her mind to see what she should do next.

Should I run? Flee? Help my friend?

Snowball is staring- oh no, oh no-

"WHAT?!" The livid ball of snow screamed, his fingers instinctively curling into tightened fists. From the way his arms trembled, it served as a warning to her, reminding her to think about the next words that would escape her mouth. With a gulp, Book spoke.

"W-Wh- ... Why...?" Book asked, her tone hushed as she drowned in her own hesitancy. Snowball stared down at her, his darkened eyes fixing into the core of her very being...

...Before a soft chuckle broke past his mouth.

"You really don't know, do you." He uttered through gritted teeth. Blinking, Book would glance back and forth, her mouth twitching as she tried to form a response.

"ANSWER ME!"

Fuck.

Carefully pulling in a breath, her eyes would glare back at his direction. "I-.. what are you talking about..?!"

"Please. I wouldn't expect a weakling like YOU to know. All thanks to that armless orange BOZO, we're going to be crawling and caving through this stupid city, FOR THE REST OF OUR LIVES!"

Frowning, Book's heart would drop, imploding from the crushing pressure of her fear. "...Crawling..? I-... you're- looking..?"

"OF COURSE we're looking! Aren't you supposed to be smart?!"

"S-Snowball-"

"If it weren't for her, I would've made ALL OF YOU HELP!"

"HELP?! WITH WHAT?!" Book's tongue had gained a mind of its own, throwing the words out with a scream before she could even think. Her hands slapped over her mouth in shock, instinctively stepping away from the muscular object before her.

Too late. With his fist now lifting into the air, she clenched her teeth, bracing herself for the impact.

But as she hears the swoosh of the wind, a voice then pierces through the air.

"SNOWBALL!"

Book jumped, her eyes widening at the sound of Basketball's voice. She looks up, watching as frustration blanketed over Snowball's irked face, turning to face the orange sports ball. Behind her stood Robot

Flower, with Blocky following suit, a gasp breaking past his mouth as he saw Snowball.

Yet, the colder object couldn't care less.

"What." He snapped, unimpressed by her interruption. "What do you want."

"Why are you- oh my court, you're hurting everyone!" Basketball shouts. She frowns when Book scrambles out of Snowball's reach, quickly rushing to Nickel's aid, frantically checking his injury.

Much to Book's relief, it was nothing serious, but it was still agonizing to see. His cheek was now swollen, blood drooling down his curled mouth as the glowing hue of a tooth struck out from the growing puddle of blood beneath him. The sight, as well as the shout, captured the attention of those who had been strolling through the city with their own responsibilities to accomplish.

Basketball watched as more objects approached them all. From the objects who had been recovered, to the former TLC-er's who joined in the search effort, they all stared with fear at the scene that played out, confusion sifting through the atmosphere. Leafy rushed over, her hands lifting into fists as she looked around.

"Who's hurting them?!" She shouted.

Firey quickly had to pull her back, grinning as the others shot her an angered glare. "U-Uh- Leafy-"

"No- What's going on?! Who's hurt?!"

"You'll be if you don't shut UP." Snowball snapped.

"What's going on?" Fries demanded, instinctively reaching up and placing a hand on Puffball. "Why is he going on another rant?!"

His voice shot through her like a bullet from a gun of realization. Basketball could feel her face turning pale, taking careful steps away from the crowd. "Fries, it's nothing to worry about!"

"Nothing?! He knocked Nickel's TOOTH out!"

"He's just stressed! W-We've been doing some field work, and-"

"You're LYING."

"Lying?? Who said she was lying?" Saw exclaimed, a crooked smile on her shining face. Fries couldn't help but glare down at the other object, resulting in Gaty stepping in front of her defensively.

"Fries," She huffed. "Believe us. We're just helping them with a little field work."

"You two are helping the scientists with their scientific work?"

"Like that's such an important issue for you."

Not wanting the situation to escalate any further, Blocky broke the two up, shaking her head in worry. "Everyone, please. I'll take care of Snowball."

Snowball cracks his knuckles, his scowl warning the others to step back. "Take care of me?! We couldn't even take care of HIM!"

"SB, please- I-I know you're upset, but we have to-"

"SHUT IT. WE'RE LOSING TIME HERE- HE'S STILL OUT THERE BY HIMSELF!"

"Who...?" Bubble's voice made a few heads turn. She stepped towards the group, her hand pulling away from Fanny's plug tail, much to the shorter object's dismay. "Who's still out there..?"

"Bubb.." Fanny whispered, gently trying to pull her back. Even with the feeling of her lover's plug brushing against her arm, she steps away, her eyes glossing over with terror as her thoughts begin to spiral.

Quickly, Basketball stuttered out an explanation. "B-Bubble- everyone, please. It's just a misunderstanding- but we promise, it's nothing to worry about.. We're really just looking for something to aid in our-"

"If it's nothing to worry about," Bubble whispered. "Can't you tell us

what you're looking for...?"

"Or what you've found." Book interjected, her head lifting towards Basketball. Her gaunt expression was enough to warn the woman, but she refused to cause another panic to break within the city.

Her efforts were quickly diminishing. Despite her words, she could only watch as the guidebooks eyes narrowed, her limbs beginning to tremble at the possibility...

The possibility that...

Oh, no...

"..I-is.. Is it-"

"A COMMUNITY GARDEN!" Saw screamed out before she had the chance to think. Gaty would turn towards her, shocked, until Puffball's voice cut through her thoughts. "WHAT?!"

"A-A community garden...! Y'know- one we can all work on, together!"

Silence.

Fries turned away, his eyes now awakening from an anger he had kept at bay for days on end.. "...Basketball, tell us this is some sort of joke."

All eyes were back onto Basketball. All waiting for some sort of answer, some form of guidance that could ease the tides of confusion that tossed everyone left and right. Yet, she found her mind freezing over, the shock of the statement causing her to stutter.

"I..I-"

"It isn't!" Robot Flower buzzed in, quickly saving her dearest from stumbling any further. This would only leave the orange scientist stunned, blinking as her head tilted to its side.

"Robot Flower-"

"Gaty and Saw have been kind enough to try and help you recovered folk in any way that they could! Right, you two?"

Robot Flower turned, frantically shooting them a tensed glance. Saw's eyes darted back from her, towards the others, forcing a wobbling smile on her face. "Y-Yeah! I baked those pastries to help take a little more off of your guys' plates, after all! I'm really happy that everyone was able to enjoy them..."

She had to keep herself from saying 'almost', even as the memory of Teardrop scratched back into her mind.

"Because of this," Robot Flower continued, "They figured that it was time to help you all a little more. We can't imagine what you all had to see when we were trapped in that stupid box- but, while we were coming up with ideas, Basketball mentioned the topic of exposure therapy!"

Basketball blinked. "...I did?"

"Babe!"

"OH- I-I sure did!"

"Exposure therapy...?" Bubble tilted her head, letting Robot Flower nod, continuing to play along.

"Basically, with Saw's- community garden idea, we help you all face your fears by creating something you can control! We start a garden, right here in the Towns Square- and we all contribute to it, together!"

"Yeah!" Saw chimed in. "We're also here to listen and to talk, too! Anything to help you all feel a little more at home!"

The group- well, the collective group of those who were recovered- all stood in silence, trying to take in the idea that had been suggested to them. Teardrop couldn't stop herself from glaring at the two, their hands shivering with rage at the complete idiocy that these two had.

Yet, Needle would look up, rubbing the back of her neck with a sigh. She was conflicted- reminded- of the terrors of the past. But she was exhausted from staying trapped in these looping nightmares, wanting

to put this all to rest.

It wasn't until Fries stepped forwards, his eyes dim as he placed the bag of growtato's down. "..I can grow my growtato's there."

That was it. Enraged, Snowball would sputter out nonsense, his hands slapping over his head."Seriously?! Gardens?! COMMUNITIES?! THERAPY?! WHY IS THIS EVEN A THING?!"

Basketball rushed towards his side, nudging him away from the group before she scowled.

"Snowball," she hissed, lowly. "I am trying to keep things COOL here. If we don't- we'll only get more distracted from looking for-"

A voice then spoke. "Who said something about therapy?"

Was there ANYONE ELSE who wanted to interrupt them?!

Frustrated, Basketball would look up, noticing Flower as she stepped onto the scene. Ruby stood by her side, their hands interlocked together as her eyebrow raised, puzzled.
"What's all this?" She asked. Basketball shook her head, quickly shooing the two away.

"Just some stuff- working on getting you all therapy! More help! Now, GO."

"Therapy, huh.." Flower scoffed, quickly stepping away as she led Ruby over towards Bubble and Fanny. Her words made the shorter objects eyebrows crease, her mouth curving into a frown.

"I HATE therapy!" She shouted.

"Fanny..."

Ah- crap.

Shrinking with shame, Fanny's scowl would ease into a pout, turning away as she responded. "Sorry, Bubb."

"It's okay.." Bubble sighed, gently pulling her back for a gentle hug.

The electrical fan would tense up, until the familiar warmth of her girlfriend made her body relax, her plug-tail wrapping around her in order to 'hug' her in return.

Ruby watched, noticing Bubble's eyes slowly shifting to meet her. She gave the gemstone a weakened smile, only returned by a few blinks from her. She turned, stepping towards the group with confusion.

"What's the whole therapy thing about?" She asked. Gaty walked over, not hesitating to help the two newcomers catch up.

"We just thought that it'd be nice to start a garden here in the Town's Square. One that you all have control over..."

"G-Garden..?" The faint whisper made the others fall quiet. All heads would turn to find the source of the voice, with their many eyes trailing towards Ice Cube, who stared at the group, a hidden terror beginning to awaken from its slumber.

Behind her, Pencil and Match were walking onto the scene, noticing the others as they were talking amongst themselves.

"I-ICY- ITS OKAY..." Bracelety would reassure her, letting her arm wrap around her gently.

"W-Why did you, like, choose a garden?" Match frowned. "Couldn't you have, like, done something else? Like...pastries?"

"Yeah. I-I'm sorry- but some of us are still in the deep end here." Pencil sighed, tightening the scarf around her neck. Gaty shook her head.

"You don't have to participate if you don't want to! We promise! All we want is to help you gain some sense of normalcy around here..."

Pencil couldn't stop herself from letting out a halfhearted chuckle, crossing her arms. "Psh... we're not declining the invite here."

At her words, Snowball's eyes darkened. Nobody was taking this seriously any longer, his frustrations having reached beyond his limit. Anger swelled at the core of his face, and before Pencil knew it, the larger object's rage exploded.

He launched himself towards the pencil, his right arm curving into a roundhouse strike, plummeting against her jaw and sending her to the ground with an audible crack. Match's panicked yells became intelligible, with rage blinding Snowball's mind, his eyes snapping towards her as she whipped towards him with her arm beginning to swing. Snowball ducked, sidestepping and forcefully shoving her across the pavement with such force, that a cloud of dust rose from the impact. The objects that were going about their daily lives would quickly turn towards the scene, with some frantically rushing to stop him from causing anymore damage.

Though, he was done. Snowball had reached his limit, and there was no going back for him.

All hell broke loose at that moment. With both Freesmart Leaders now knocked down, the remaining Freesmarters would scramble towards the two, their frantic yells tuning out from the environment.

Nobody was taking this seriously.

Nobody.

There was nothing that could encapsulate the feeling of his own heart boiling from his rage. With the sound of footsteps quickly beginning to thump into his mind, his body frilled, suddenly letting his fists take control.

When Flower hurls herself towards him, he charged.

"FUCK OFF!" He screamed, swinging down. His fist jams into her windpipe, silencing the scream that rose from her throat. He continues to punch, ignoring the way she clawed and kicked at his body, before Ruby would forcefully slam a small rock onto the side of his head.

This catches him, and with a clean swing, he drives his fist into her scarred eye. Enough for the memories to flood back into her mind.

Enough for her to lose her cool.

Fists collided with endless surfaces, shoving against the skin of chests and faces. Fries rushed over, with a faint pink hue sinking within his

carton as he swung a powerful hit. Snowball immediately caught his fist, lashing out with his free arm, catching Fries straight in the eye. Stars blotted his vision as the red object stumbled onto the ground, his skull roaring from pain and dizziness.

Panting, Snowball caught a faint hue of periwinkle dashing past the corner of his eye. He charged again and caught Gaty with his hands, whirling her around and jamming into the center of her face. This sent the girl flying back, and before he knew it, the panicked yells and cries would fall into a numbing buzz that rang endlessly in his head.

It wasn't long until Snowball's fists were bloody and battered. He didn't care if anyone was trying to stop him or flee; his rage had become unbearable to handle, as he was not taking Grassy's disappearance well.

To his surprise, he catches Book charging straight towards him, her fists butting straight into Snowball's chest.

Her eyes- they roared with flames of anger. Not only had he injured the two people who helped her feel a sense of peace- but he had hurt them.

Flower.

Ruby...

The bully jerked slightly, aiming for the top of Book's head, but she slipped from his aim and swung a hard punch at his side. He has to clench his teeth to hold back any sound of pain, before his fist swipes towards the side of her face, catching Book by surprise. The punch ripped up the side of her face, stumbling back with an angered yell.

The last thing he could remember seeing was Bubble running straight towards him. Snowball finds a smirk rising on his face, making a mad dash towards the other with his fists shooting straight into the air.

Bubble showed no sign of fear- at least, towards him. The sounds of her pained friends cries were enough to make her go and try to stop the madness, and before she could block the punch that he was ready

to throw, a sudden object cuts in between the two.

"BUBBLE!"

She recognized that voice. And for a second, she finds the tension and strength leaving her body, her heart beating ever so gently by the soothing relief she felt by that voice.

Fanny's voice.

Taken off guard, it was enough for Snowball to make his move, cackling as he hurled his hands down towards the electrical fan. Fanny quickly dodged his punches, using her plug-tail to whip at his eye, forcing an angered yell to break past his lips. Bubble, who was now stumbling towards the two, reached towards her with a cry.

"FANNY?!"

Darting her head towards her, Fanny would shout back to her.

"BUBB- GET OUT OF-"

Snowball's hands then grab at Fanny's ankles. With horror, Bubble watched as Fanny's face swelled with frustration, before the brute's face darkened with fury at the shorter woman.

That's when he lifts her upwards, and with a clean swing, he launched Fanny straight to the ground, following it with two hard, bone-crushing thuds. The first made Fanny yell from surprise- and the second, sent her head popping off from her blue mechanical body, only held together by a mere string.

Any chance of fighting back had been extinguished; Snowball could tell just from Bubble's face. She frantically ran towards her girlfriend, crying out in anguish while he turned away, finding himself fighting into the crowd before him.

Everything began to blur. Something just told him to continue punching, to kick and fight whatever or whoever stood in his way; it didn't matter what was driving him to do so, he just had to punch, to shove, to BREAK-

"SNOWBALL!"

That's when a pair of hands yank Snowball away, snapping him back to the reality that he had drifted off from. He blinks rapidly, his bloodshot eyes frantically darting around at the readjusting city, sounds and sights returning to his body.

Despite the mess that he had caused, his eyes immediately fell upon Blocky, who stood in front of him with his hands holding onto his shoulders. Taking careful steps, the wooden block would lead him away from the scene, keeping him from looking up.

"SB- SB, breathe." Blocky directed, noticing the rapid breaths that wheezed past the ball of snow. Shivering, Snowball would instinctively cling to the others arms, gripping them with clenched teeth.

"I-..." Trying to find the words to say, Snowball would instead cough, his lungs burning from the air that was swept into his lungs.

"Breathe..."

"F-Fuck... Man, I-"

"Shh..."

There was something about the sound of Blocky's voice; Snowball couldn't ever pinpoint what it was, but the way he spoke would lull his own racing heart, while, at the same time, keeping its firmness, never becoming too weak to give in. He finds himself getting lost in the mahogany of Blocky's pupils, his fingers resting tenderly over the other guy's wrist.

Is this what... safety felt like? Snowball never had to worry about that- his brawn kept him from becoming an easy target to everyone around him. Even with this, he never understood the feeling whenever he'd overhear another object bringing it up.

But here he was, nerves buzzing within his stomach as he continued to stare into Blocky's eyes, his heart skipping a beat with the way they glistened from the sun. Blocky couldn't help but notice this, and he smiled, hesitantly placing a hand on his cheek.

"SB?" He asks with a tender hush, enough to make Snowball's eyes burn.

Burn... with tears...? God, no.

Snowball's eyes fluttered, yet it wasn't enough- a dewiness flooding over his pupils as his eyes would remain widened, attempting to keep the tears in.

With a pathetic sniffle, he uttered, "...I miss him so much..."

Following his words, Blocky would throw his arms around the ball of snow, pulling him in for a firm hug. The larger object squirmed at first, but quickly mellowed down, slumping pathetically with his arms wrapping around him gently, like the loose ends of a ribbon.

Both of them stayed that way for what felt like ages, before Blocky looked down.

"I-I know," he whispered. "I miss him too."

Snowball's eyes squeezed shut, his teeth gritting together with the familiar flame of anger flickering in his chest. "I'm just- mad- nobody is helping, and they're just... MOCKING us!"

"SB..."

With a huff, Snowball's head lifted towards the air, letting his eyes take a closer look at the damage he had done. The sight doesn't surprise him one bit, small trails of blood and debris from tattered objects scattered across the pavement, with the others frantically checking on their injuries.

Not even a speck of guilt would fall upon his heart, even as the cries and murmurs would wash into his mind. He looked to the side, his line of sight first rolling onto Fries.

He had forgotten about Puffball for a while, now. She hasn't been flying through the air like she used to, so Snowball didn't bother thinking about the chick while he lived in the city. Until now, that is, when he notices the frantic fuzzball poking out from Fries's carton, frantically checking on him and asking if he was alright.

That black eye said one thing, but the potato-box shook his head, much to Snowball's confusion. With a grunt, Fries lifted himself from the pavement, wincing at the audible cracking of his joints. Puffball would begin to peek out more and more, only to be met with Fries's resistance as he led her back into his carton.

"Gaty!"

A voice that pulled Snowball's attention away. Looking towards the left, he watched as Saw would frantically shake Gaty in her arms, a noticeable bruise darkening on her forehead, with a streak of blood running down her 'nose'.

"Gaty?!" Saw shouted, tears in her eyes. "Gaty, can you hear me?!"

Judging from the way the gate's eyes fluttered, Snowball could tell she could. With a wince, Gaty let out a grunt of pain, her eyes fluttering open.

"Ugh.." She murmured. "what happened..?"

"GATY!"

"Oh- S-Saw.." Gaty jumped, as Saw threw herself onto her, hugging her as tightly as she could. A few seconds passed where Gaty would try and squirm from the tightened hold, yet her eyes would blink, before she found herself melting into the other woman's chest, sleepily taking in her warmth.

And then, Snowball overhears a familiar voice.

"Fanny?! Fanny, say something!"

"BUBBLE-"

"P-Please- oh, oim so sorry- oi- FANNY!"

Slowly, the ball of snow turns to come across the Freesmarters. He blinks, silently watching as Bubble would cradle Fanny's head in one arm, her body in the other, with rivers of tears running down her panicked face.

Beside her stood Bracelety; she had been protecting her Icy from the chaos that had unfolded, but seeing one of her friends get injured by the brute, she would gently reach to grab Bubble's shoulder.

"BUBBLE!" She calls. Bubble looks up, her cries falling silent, with her tears still shimmering down her metallic face. The sorrowed look in her eyes was enough to tell Bracelety everything she needed- lowering her voice, she would explain.

"She's still alive- s-she just... she's just knocked out.."

"H-How do you knoiw..?" Bubble asked, her voice reduced to a sorrowful whisper. Bracelety shook her head, recalling.. well... a few incidents that had taken place in the TLC.

"It's happened before. Trust me, it's nothing we have to worry about.."

"..Oicy..?"

Hesitantly, Ice Cube would step forward, giving her a nervous, yet reassuring smile. "Bracelety knows what she's doing- t-they're friends too, remember..?"

At her words, Bubble would nod, bringing a reassuring smile to the bracelet's face. She helped her up, letting her cradle Fanny, who was unconscious from the whole debacle. The look of worry in Bubble's eyes would make Bracelety reach over, a soft smile on her face.

"It'll be a gentle recovery, I promise!"

The ease in her voice- a consideration that she hadn't seen, or felt, in ages. It lifts a genuine smile on Bubble's face, as she nodded with ease.

"O-Oi... Oi trust you.."

"Cmon'- Icy and I will help you both!"

Icy...

Her alliance...

Her head darted back and forth, worriedly looking for the other Freesmarter's. Her eyes come across Book, who stared at her with a faint scowl, yet she takes no note of this, as she begins to notice the missing presence of her team.

"B-But, but Pencil-"

"We're, like, right here Bubble.." Match's voice interjected, faintly warbling from the fear she still carried. It made the poor soap bubble relax, looking over to see the rest of their alliance stumbling towards them. Yet, she couldn't help but notice Match's presence.

"You're outsoide..?" She whispered, much to Match's dismay.

"Like- yes, I am.."

"Aren't you still scared of..-"

"Slowly getting used to it." Match murmured. Beside her, Pencil would let out a groan, weakly holding at the bruise that Snowball had left her as her girlfriend would gently wrap an arm around her, helping her stay on her feet.

"Ugh.." Pencil hissed at the pain. "W-We all need to get ourselves some ice.."

"I can get some." Flower said weakly, wincing at the hoarseness in her throat. She could feel the bruise forming at her skin, but this wasn't much- as she had to help her little gemstone from another episode she had gotten during the fight.

In her arms, Ruby's face had become gaunt, her eyes locked in a thousand yard stare that dug straight into Snowball. With the help of GB's Zelatonin, she was able to ground herself much more easily- yet her eyes narrowed with rage at the brute, making him frown.

Moments pass, and the team helped one another get back on their balance. He watched as Bubble looked around, her stomach churning from the bitter realization that out of the whole group, only one person was injured enough to be knocked unconscious.

And that person was her own girlfriend.

My girl... Fanny...

With tears in her eyes, they narrow, her frown twitching at the edges from the heaviness in her heart.

Meanwhile, he shifts his gaze to the side, watching as Book held her own injuries, carefully helping Nickel sit up, with the assistance of Bomby.

"Careful-.. there we go.." He stated worriedly.

Blinking unevenly, Nickel could feel the world around him spinning relentlessly. Book would lift his cheek, frowning at the bruise that was forming at his jaw. "Let's get him back to the hotel. Oh- his jaw is so swollen.." She stated.

"His jaw?! Is it dislocated?!" Bomby frantically asked, quickly holding his boyfriend close.

"No! Thankfully... We're just going to have to help the swelling go down-"

"M-My tooth.." Whispered Nickel, whose eyes gazed down at the tooth that had been knocked out. Bomby frowned, gently placing a hand on the top of his head.

"Shh- don't move it too much.."

"How are you feeling right now?" Book asked. The coin blinked, processing the words from his friend, before a ditzy smile would stretch across his face.

"I... am... *LL*Living the dream, haha..."

With the way his words slurred out of his mouth, Book would shake her head, helping Bomby get him up from the ground. She let her gaze break away, looking towards the others as she began to help her friends return to the hotel.

Instead of focusing on her neighbors- her own friends- her eyes latch onto the bruises and cuts, taking in the carnage that bled from their damaged bodies, before they returned towards the man who had

caused it all.

Snowball would continue to glance at the people he had hurt. All of them, now carrying marks that would remain because of his own hands.

And that's when Snowball sees... *it.*

Behind...

The way it stared.

It...

Smiling...

Oh.

No.

NO.

To Blocky's dismay, he began to feel Snowball thrashing around, his breaths racing as a wheeze of terror broke past his throat.

"No-" He gasped. "Let me GO-"

"SNOWBALL." Blocky shouted, grabbing his shoulders with a firm hold. He noted the fear that painted over his face- yet, his eyes quickly lock onto a strange, red hue, one that would fade in and out of his misty-grey pupils. This only made Snowball scream, trying to get the block to let go.

"LOOK AT THEM- LOOK AT HIM! LOOK AT HER- LOOK AT HER!"

Yeah. He needed rest.

Grunting, Blocky would pull him aside, leading him to a quieter part of the city. "Okay. Come on. We'll keep looking after you cool down."

Blocky grunts as he tries holding him down. He noticed faint, red veins that would pulsate beneath his hold, but he shakes his head. It was just his veins- he was a beefy guy, after all.

"NO- NO NO, DAMMIT, COME ON!"

"YOU NEED REST, SNOWBALL!"

"BLOCKY!"

Dragging him away, his screaming began to grow quiet- a great relief, if Robot Flower must say. The past few days had felt nothing short of endless, even as she tried to keep a positive mainframe towards the situation at hand.

Looking around, she helps any injured object that she can, giving a wave towards Roboty, who stood in the distance with David by his side. The red robot's eyes would blink with the glow of his lights, returning the greeting with a faint beep.

That's when she felt someone tapping on her metallic arm. Looking over, she feels her programming blooming with a light happiness as Remote filled her line of sight.

"Hey." She buzzed out.

"Hi." Remote smiled. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah.... Helping Basketball as much as I can here."

"I can tell. How's the search going?"

"As well as it can be going..." Robot Flower sighed. "What about you? How are those batteries working out for you?"

Remote couldn't help but frown at the statement. She could read it in the tone of her voice box- things were becoming bleak. With a gentle hand, she patted her back with a reassuring sigh.

"I'm feeling better," she stated. "the new batteries are working perfectly."

"That's great to hear."

"It is!" Liy chimed in, happily throwing her arms around her robotic partner. "And I can't thank you enough!"

Robot Flower watched as a smile flickered onto Remote's face, her indicator button beginning to glow and fade with a rapid pulse. She remembered Golfball's work when it came to object anatomy- the pulsating glow reminding her of the rapid beating of her own 'heart'.

Smirking, she watched as Remote would turn towards her. "L-Liy.." She said, smiling. "It's very nice to see you too."

This made the poor lightswitch jump, an awkward smile on her face as she rubbed the back of her head. "Oh! S-Sorry, haha.."

"It's okay."

"No need to apologize." Robot Flower chuckled.

Blush permeated through Liy's face, as she would let her arms pull away from Remote's body. Before she could step away, Remote would reach over, her metallic fingers wrapping around her lovers hand with a swift and gentle movement. Liy couldn't stop herself from smiling even more, leaning in and kissing the side of Remote's face.

Remote almost stumbled from the affection. Her eyes practically radiated with joy, only holding her lover's hand closer to herself before a playful giggle would catch the three off.
"Oooh, looks like we've got some lovebirds over here!" Foldy sung teasingly, a growing smirk stretching across her face. Scoffing, Liy would give her a playful nudge, causing them to both giggle at the gesture as Stapy would hop after her, his arms crossed nonchalantly.

"More girl-kissers, huh?" He chuckled.

Liy didn't stop herself from turning towards him with a raised eyebrow. "Says the Boy kisser."

"Hey- I'm into both, here!"

With the sounds of their laughter blooming through the city, Robot

Flower felt some of the tension easing off of her grinding gears. She would say her goodbyes towards the friend group, stepping away as they made their way back to the hotel, their endless conversations floating after them.

It didn't take her long to come across Basketball, who was silently staring off into space. Carefully, the robot would reach over, placing a gentle hand on the top of her head to try and get her back, as calmly as possible.

And it worked. With a few blinks, her head would lift towards her gaze, an exhausted smile lifting onto her face.

That was enough to tell Robot Flower everything she needed to know. She makes careful movements as she pulls the sports ball into her arms, clutching her within her loving embrace. She noted the way Basketball's body would shiver, and after a few seconds of silence, she would sniffle.

"..Grassy.."

Mentioning his name made a strange cramp strike at the robotic bloom's chest. It was too gentle for it to be an issue with her robotic structure, yet too noticeable for her to ignore; a foreign sensation that would make look down, lowering her head to place a 'kiss' on her girlfriends forehead.

"We'll find him." She assuaged.

"It's been days, Robot Flower.. what.. what if he.."

"No. He's out there. I know he is. And we won't stop until we find him."

When Basketball didn't respond, Robot Flower looked down, surprised to see her staring right back up at her. Confused, the robot's head would tilt to the side, her hand lifting from her back.

"What?"

"..Have I told you how much I loved you.." Basketball whispered.

There it was again. That feeling. So foreign, yet so... alleviating, that Robot Flower couldn't help but shiver, her arms carefully pulling her closer than ever.

She had to admit- it was going to take some time to get used to this programming. Ever since she had raised her question about the possibility of a mechanical mind having a soul, Basketball went ahead and worked through her programming, letting the robot make her own requests in order to find the truth.

But moments like these would reassure her that, despite what anyone would say- she had her own soul. Her mechanical heart would beat with the love she had for her friends, her other mechanical minds, and especially her girlfriend.

Her Basketball.

"I love you too, BB.." She whispered, letting the sports ball rest in her hold. "I promise.. we're going to get our baby back."

Happy (Late) April Fools! You guys get two new chapters, and a letter. Next chapter will be up in an hour, followed by the next letter!

BEFORE ANYONE SAYS ANYTHING: YES I KNOW LIY AND FOLDY ARE ENEMIES. This is pre-bfb, so I like to think that they were friends before.... well. You'll see after the letter.

Also gay people.... gay people.

...this is 13k words.

see you in an hour!

-ice

Nobody, Cause I'm Braindead!

⚠TW: GORE. HEAVY GORE. Please read with caution.⚠

Snowball is dragged away, screaming at the top of his lungs while Blocky tries to get him to calm down.

He knew. He knew what he saw. And my heart begins to burn with, what I hope is, frustration. I try to settle myself down; I don't know why I smiled when his eyes met with mine. But a sudden thought makes my blood run cold, as I realize it wasn't my own.

"He's next." I think to myself.

Scarlet hums with interest. 'Oh?'

"He's next. I..." Why were my thoughts doing this?! There's a reason, there's got to be- I...

"I don't care anymore. I don't."

'I thought you had a list, darling~'

The list. Oh, crap. My shoulders slump, as I carefully get us up from the ground.

"...Y-You're right.." I think. "Ah, I'm-"

'No no! I'm not disagreeing with you here...'

"But- the list..."

'There's no shame in bending the rules a little, is there? Hey- Pin did it before- and she was just fine! Made it as far as she did because of it, too!'

"...."

'Come on... would anybody really miss that brute, if he was gone..?~'

Weeks.

It's been weeks since he had last seen Grassy.

Snowball hated how his devastation drained him from the energy he needed. There was no time for tears- that was something a weak, armless loser (like Basketball) would do. No. He needed to keep his head up high.

A blizzard of thoughts raged in the depths of his mind, but the things that would ease his fears would be the memories of Grassy's strength. The kid had learned a lot since Blocky had first introduced him- all thanks to his own strength and skills, of course.

Even if he was hurt, he knew that he carried the tips and skills he taught him. Nothing would try and hurt him- the kid had the ability to lift entire INVENTIONS, despite Bossy-Bot's angered rants.

Speaking of, he remembered the way she exploded at his sudden outburst a few days back.

"ARE YOU CRAZY?!" Her nasally voice always made him cringe. "WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT?!"

He rolled his eyes at the memory. Basketball was also there to lecture him, while she tried to make sure he kept his mouth shut. She really didn't want them to hear about the two disappearances- and Snowball was real close to dropping that news onto that bozo- but Blocky's presence was enough to keep him tame, as he was standing

right by his side. Tennis Ball had also been there; in between his exasperated rants, would try and comfort Bozo, who kept getting these headaches in the middle of her screaming.

Well. Maybe if she could've stopped screeching like a fucking seagull, maybe she wouldn't have to deal with it. He remembered hearing about her getting them a lot more often now- not like he gave a fuck about it.

Sighing, Snowball continued to trudge through the city, coughing under his breath. He swore, there had to be some kind of cold going around the city- he was falling sick. This didn't stop him from looking, as he soon found himself at the path of the Freesmart Supervan. He had made it to the clearing like he had originally hoped, which only meant that it was time for him to roll up his sleeves, and get to searching.

"Snowball!" I knew he'd be here. I recognized their search pattern- Blocky was talking about it that day, once everybody was clearing out of the Town's Square.

Immediately, he turns to face me. I'm far too used to the dissatisfied expression that greets me; for a brief moment, I see a glint of hesitancy, until his eyebrows crease with anger.

He says my name.

"What do you want?" *He snaps.* "Can't you see I'm busy."

'Busy, huh.'

It's what he's saying...

'..Well... It's been a while since I've said these words.. but it looks like you're going to have to act, my dear!'

Act...

..Could I even try..?

"I-.." I let my voice quiver with distress. "I saw him."

From the way his anger melted away, I can tell he believed me.

"What- you did?!"

'Great work!'

I nod. He reached over, startling me before I stepped away from his hands.

Those damned hands.

Unfortunately, this only makes his anger return.

"Where did you see him?!"

'Act...'

My stomach turns at the word.

I look down.

"ANSWER ME. Did you see him or NOT?!"

"H-He's.. oh.."

"WHERE IS HE YOU LITTLE-"

"...The garden..."

..It's been a while since I've felt any kind of happiness.

Ever since this has started, I could barely remember the way my old self lived- I don't even know how she survived.

Because now, I have to bite back the urge to smile, watching as his

expression dropped from anger, to confusion, and finally, horror.

"...GRASSY!"

That's when she runs off.

Goddammit- No, she had to be lying! There was no way the kid knew where that place was- after he took care of it, there was nothing more but ASH in that stupid garden!

How the hell did she even-

"Come on! I can help!"

No. Snowball looked up, his heart dropping when he realized that she was far ahead of him.

Fuck.

He knew there was no other choice.

Snowball braces himself as he twists away from his shock. He attempted to assuage the awakening horrors of what he had seen, convincing himself with each running step that it was something small.

Perhaps Grassy was hurt- sprained leg, sprained arm, please, something as simple as that.

Hell, he wouldn't even lecture the kid. Just this once. He'd scoop him into his arms, and give him the biggest hug he could ever imagine.

With the sun beginning to set, there was no way he could get the others. All four of them had agreed to split up to cover more ground with the effort of finding any sort of clue that could lead to Grassy's whereabouts. He made the decision to cover the clearing around the old recovery center, as well as clearing before the evil forest.

And so far, it had gotten him somewhere. She was genuine about it; he refused to believe that the garden was back, but he trusted her word.

His friend- his *son*- he was hurt.

It had been too long since he had seen the kid. With her knowing his whereabouts, he only clenched his teeth, forcing himself to sprint down the familiar path with the faint crunching of graveled dirt echoing through the trees.

He comes to a screeching halt when he sees the sudden blockade. Twisted, rooted trees that attempted to block his way, Snowball would blink, frantically looking around for the sight of-

"HEY!" He shouted, his voice echoing through the shivering branches. WHERE DID YOU GO?!"

"Over here!"

So faint, yet so near. "WHERE?! STOP FUCKING WITH ME- WHERE DID YOU-"

Suddenly, he hears a giggle. That damn giggle he had grown used to, ever since he saw him dashing across the metal box- it makes his heart drop.

It couldn't have been. There was no way- Grassy wasn't even...

She's probably messing with him.

Another.

"Grassy?!" Snowball whispers, his hands immediately blooming from the clenched fists that held them tightly. He forgets where he is in the woods, now, his mind locks onto the source of the giggle, knowing that he must run after him, find him, and bring him home.

He snaps away from the fallen trees, sprinting around them before running straight down the path once more. The air around him darkens, sounds from the city falling into a deafening silence. He knew where this path led. He was one of the few who burned it

down, after all.

The trees and paths merge with one another, the giggle echoing around him. Snowball runs wildly towards the sound of the giggle, forcefully slapping lowered branches and horned bushes out of his way.

That's when his heart freezes over with frosty horror.

He catches a glimpse of a now-growing garden, hands protruding from the ground with their fingers dangling like a noose from the damned gallows. What was once a charred piece of land, now had a grassy field blooming in its wake, with plants and flowers scattered as they were beginning to bud.

His stomach contorts with horror. The blood that raced through his veins freezes, and he is unable to stop himself from glancing up.

Tree was the first to greet him. Standing high over the garden, his body had contorted over his original self, raw flesh twitching as his muscles flexed. Every twitch his head made would result in raw brain matter pouring from his open skull, yet his eye stayed locked onto Snowball's. Small, budding plants inched out of his wound, soft pieces of brain matter staining its bright, green hue.

A grunt broke past his open throat. To Snowball, it amplified into a scream for salvation.

But then, the whine.

Every bone in his body stiffened with terror as he recognized the sound of the whine.

Grassy's eye should have been the first thing he saw. Instead, Snowball's eyes fall upon his opened chest cavity, his still-growing heart pumping violently as his blood spilled into the soil below. His arms had been ripped off, his clavicle bone painted with his own blood as it protruded from the open wound. His throat was slit open into a bright red grin, and, for a second, he swore he could hear the kid whining out his name.

"I told you I saw him..."

Pain cracked through the back of his head, and his thoughts came to a halt. Before Snowball could realize it, his body succumbed to the numbness as darkness enveloped the world around him.

"So, what's that old grease trap doing with that mess in the backyard?"

"That's where he grew his grotatoes."

"..Don't you mean potatoes?"

"No no- growtatoes! They're the same thing."

Quizzically, Lollipop tapped her chin, her eyes lifting towards the window. "Fascinating.."

Gelatin couldn't stop himself from snickering under his breath. Watching Lollipop grow interested in one of Fries's specialties was enough to make him plan their future attempts at getting some of the grotato's from the farm. Now that he had some new friends by his side- his chances were better than ever.

Raising an eyebrow, Taco could immediately tell what was going through the desserts mind. "Speaking of- how is he doing? I heard Snowball hit him pretty hard..."

He looked down, wincing at the memory of Fries's black eye. "..He's uh.. he's doing okay."

"I don't know what could've made that brute snap. Seriously- he needs to chill."

"Hah! Good one."

"..That wasn't a pun?"

Snickering, Gelatin would shake his head. "Well, still. I had to get some ice packs for him- the swelling is going down, since he's actually going to that community garden thing."

"I see," Lollipop spoke. "Is he planting his growtato's there, too?"

"Only a few."

"Huh, are they a brand or something?" Taco asked, still attempting to discern the topic at hand as she took the vacant seat beside Lollipop.

"Nah- TB made them when we first moved to Yoyle City." Gelatin responded, smiling. "Fries was down to his last fry, and he needed to grow some more. That's how he can survive after all."

"But he's already down to his last fry... doesn't that mean he should be starting another garden again?"

The gentle vibe that radiated around the three vanished at Taco's words. Instead, that dreaded silence replaced it, causing the woman to notice Gelatin's timorous expression.

It had been days, yet Gelatin was still having trouble when it came to opening up towards them. Well, there were many barriers that the two had to dismantle, with Taco offering endless words of reassurance, and Lollipop helping him ground himself when something triggered his memories of the past. Each moment of panic became easier for Gelatin to face- even finding himself using these techniques when he was on his own.

With his eyes closing, he would draw in steadied breaths, his heart carefully beginning to ease off of its pace as Taco worriedly reached over.

"Oh. Crap- Jelly, I'm so sorry, I didn't-"

Gelatin shook his head, quickly interrupting the other woman. "No... it's fine, I just... Ugh... it keeps happening.."

"Is that Zelatonin doing anything about those episodes?" Huffing in

annoyance, Lollipop's fingers drummed against the surface of the table.

She recalled the green guy rambling about that stuff when they had last met. A meeting in the rain led to several days spent in the city, taking in the rare rays of sunlight that broke through the towering facilities, and enjoying one another's company. He'd ramble endlessly about his time in the games, to his friendship with someone named Firey, all the way down to the care he felt towards those he loved.

Lollipop had to admit- it was sweet to see. Their first interaction always left her in the dust; there was no way the Gelatin she had seen during the recovery process was the one that was sitting across from her now.

Yet, here they were. Bits and pieces of himself were finally returning to the surface, trusting them, even basking in the peace that he had lost so long ago.

So hearing that these episodes were continuously happening was nothing more than worrying for the purple pop. Squinting, she watched as Gelatin lifted his arms into a shrug, his head tilting to the side.

"Sort of...?" He said with bemusement. "It's mostly used for our nightmares and stuff. I have no idea if Golfball is making something to help us deal with that- but for now I'm stuck with them."

"And the grease trap?"

He snickered at the nickname Lollipop had given Fries. "He gets them too. Never tells us about it.?

"Us?" Intrigued, Taco would lean towards him. "I thought it was just you and him?"

"Nah. Me and Puffball."

"Huh..." Lollipop found herself dwelling back on the days of the TLC. "Haven't heard that name in a while."

Taco let her cheek rest against her own hand, her elbow resting on

the table. "She's the pink fluff ball that flies, right?"

"Mhm."

"She managed to escape the TLC back when we were still trapped. What did she do once she found you guys?"

Flashbacks of their reunion filled Gelatin's mind. While he wasn't there to see how they had first reacted, he remembered walking by, soon capturing a glimpse of the flying object. It was a jumpscare, as she had betrayed their team back in BFDIA- but seeing the way they'd act towards one another was enough to make him stick his tongue out.

"She went straight to Fries, obviously." He snickered. "It was gross."

Now, it was Lollipop's turn to lean forward with interest. "Wait, she's in love with that carton of salt sticks?" She asked, her eyebrow raised.

Ah, right. Gelatin thought to himself. They didn't know about them.

How he wished he didn't, too. Fries and Puffball were always too cheesy for their own good- hell, he remembered walking by, looking for Fries to see if he could have another dish of his famous mashed growtato's.

Instead, he walked in to see the two smooching away. There was no doubt that Fries denied it, at first- yet it was painfully clear to see how he'd soften at the sound of her voice.

Rolling his eyes, Gelatin would nod towards the two. "Yeah, they were always close."

"Never imagined someone like her being with someone like him." Lollipop could feel a smirk growing on her face, unable to stop herself from thinking about the plethora of ways she could try and tease at the two.

She was so thankful that she wasn't as cheesy as the others.

One glance, and Taco could already tell what her girlfriend was thinking about. She didn't hesitate to let her hand reach for hers,

their fingers intertwining like the silk of a looping ribbon, gently pulling them closer together. A gesture so small, but grand enough to bring Lollipop's mind back, her stomach soon filling with butterflies that fluttered around the growing nerves. She couldn't stop herself from blushing, immediately turning her head aside, even as Taco chuckled at the sight of her victory.

And just when he thought he could escape the cheesiness. Gelatin rolled his eyes at the two, much to Taco's (playful) dismay.

"Where is she anyways?" She asks, giving Lollipop's hand a gentle squeeze.

Gelatin looked down, carefully letting his hand open and close, a habit that he had grown accustomed to ever since his return. "She's usually in Fries' carton."

"Can't she fly?"

"Not anymore. I remember hearing her talk to Fries; said she's too scared to be in the open air again."

"From the looks of that scar of hers, I can only imagine what happened..." Lollipop sighed out, her eyes trailing down to Taco's hand. She let her thumb swirl against the back of her palm, resulting in a smile from her girlfriend, a smile that never failed to make her heart flutter.

Hell, Taco's presence alone made her heart flutter, sweetening her life with every passing moment they spent together.

She smiled more, her eyes closing gently as Taco leaned in, her lips pressing against her shimmering cheek, carefully getting herself up from the table. Gelatin gagged (jokingly) at the sight, resulting in a flustered glare from Lollipop herself.

It didn't stop Taco from laughing. Trailing towards the freezer, she'd reach inside its frosty interior before pulling out a few cartons of ice cream, the door shutting with a gentle thud.

"Ice cream, anyone?" She asked. Gelatin's eyes sparkled at the sight, quickly noticing the tub of black raspberry ice cream and giving her

an enthusiastic nod.

For a moment, Taco hesitantly glanced towards Lollipop- black raspberry was her go-to flavor, after all- though, the purple pop noticed the fascinated look on her friends face, letting her hand wave towards her girlfriend as a gesture of approval.

One swing, and the drawer opened, with Taco's hand sifting through the clattered utensils that piled over one another. Clashing metal pierced through the kitchen, puckering her lips in annoyance whilst coming across the utensils that weren't needed for ice cream.

A whisk. A spatula. A peeler- oh, there's the can opener. Maybe they should try and reorganize the place, now that things were finally settling down...

Soon, she would raise an eyebrow, pulling out a chef's knife and swiftly turning back towards the two.

"Lolli?" She asked. "Do you know where the spoons are?"

Lollipop peered to her side, her eyes glancing down at the drawer in front of her. "They should be in that drawer there..."

"Yeah- we've got pretty much everything except for spoons here, Lolli."

"Wh- but that was supposed to be my designated spoon drawer?! What on Earth..."

Turning, the taller woman would recall the day they had first moved in, finding any faint memory of where her spoons could be. She shrugged, and turned back towards Gelatin- her stomach dropping at the sight.

She noticed Gelatin's eyes, popping out of their sockets. His stiffened body began to shiver uncontrollably, his breaths growing frantic at the sight of the knife.

Lollipop quickly shot up from her seat, his hyperventilated breaths clawing desperately at the atmosphere. His irregular gasps for air would close in, unspoken memories poisoning his mind once more-

and with a quick glance, she was able to see what triggered the attack.

On the other hand, Taco had the knife lowered, continuing to sift through the cabinet at her poor attempt to try and find the damn spoons. She felt a hand grasping at her wrist, tightening around it before it was yanked to the side.

"Wh- hey!" She yelped. "What-"

Taco's words were quickly overpowered by Lollipop's, making careful movements with her girlfriend's wrist as she helped her place the knife back into the cabinet. "Gelatin- it's okay, " she called. "You're okay."

"I-I..." Unable to respond, Gelatin's arms wrapped around himself, desperately clinging onto his own wrists out of the fear of losing them once more. Tremors of fear shivered through his body, yet the sound of Lollipop's voice was enough to find his way back.

"Shh."

"L-Lolli-"

"Breathe..."

With the knife out of sight, Gelatin's mind slowly came to. The walls surrounding him cemented back into their original structures, his lungs soon having the strength to take in careful breaths of air.

He was grounding himself. Slowly, but steadily.

Both Taco and Lollipop exchanged nervous glances, and before she could even realize it, Taco reached into the cabinet, sifting around and lifting a fork into Lollipop's face.

A fork?

The taller woman stared in dissatisfaction, her eyebrows creasing from the sight of the utensil. Only with a look, Taco could tell what she was saying; not being able to eat ice cream if this was all they had.

Still, that didn't matter right now. Taco pressed it into her hands, cementing the fact that they had to try and help him settle from this attack. Triggers were becoming a battle that he was starting to lose, and now, they had to try and take things further.

...And how is this supposed to help? Lollipop raised her eyebrow, quickly being met with a shove.

Just- talk to him already!

"..Here. Look."

Lollipop's voice was enough to make Gelatin pause, his head slowly lifting up to meet her gaze. For a second, she would shut her eyes, reminding herself that this was the best she could do, until she held out the fork.

He stared, bewilderment shifting onto his face. "..What..?"

"Take it. It isn't ideal- but... it's what we can use to eat our ice cream. "

"B-But.." His pupils shrink, noticing just how sharp the edges were. Lollipop noticed this, gently shaking her head as she placed a hand over his.

"It won't hurt you." She reassured him. "It's a fork- forks are used to eat, not hurt."

"T-To eat.." He repeated, staring down at the utensil. Slowly, the anxiety that had been building up in the center of his chest began to drain, filling that empty space with subtle interest. He carefully twirled the fork in his hands, fiddling with it and letting his fingers brush against its silver surface.

It takes him some time. Soon, he is back to normal, his heart beating at a steady pace as he lifted his gaze from the fork.

A sigh of relief broke past Lollipop's mouth, nudging him with a reassuring smile. Gelatin couldn't stop himself from nudging her back, making her huff, showing her retaliation with another shove.

Hadn't it been for Taco shoving her arm in between the two, they would have continued into an entire fight. All playful, of course.

"Here." She laughed, placing the ice cream carton down on the table. "I know you have to go soon."

Gelatin smiled, poking at her with the fork. "Thanks!"

"Gah- Watch it!"

The sound of their laughter filled the kitchen. Pushing the chair back into the table, Gelatin would look back up towards the two.

"I-.. What are you guys gonna do..?" He asked.

Glancing towards one another, Taco would nod, answering. "Saw invited us to spend a night at the Live Hotel."

"Sounds cool.."

"Not really." Lollipop complained, her hands resting on her hips. "The place looks... too shabby for my tastes."

Oh, jeez. Taco couldn't refrain from shaking her head, playfully waving her hand in a fancified manner. "Relax, Lolli. I'm sure they'll have a fancy room for your liking."

"A fancy room for the both of us."

"I'm not worrying about some fancy room, here!"

"I'm only trying to help you have a night to remember..."

"LOLLI."

The two blink, before laughter erupts from the core of their chest, playfully embracing one another as Gelatin stood to the side. Side-eyeing the two, he held his ice cream close before poking Lollipop's side with the stick.

She was beginning to think that giving him the fork was a bad idea...

"So. I'll see you tomorrow?" He asked, ignoring the yelp she gave

from the poke. The purple pop glared down at him, only resulting in a mischievous smirk from the dessert.

"Maybe." Lollipop presumed, letting her arm readjust as Taco rested against her chest. "Swing by the day after tomorrow- we'll be waiting for you here, okay?"

"Sounds good to me!"

He stepped away, aimlessly walking towards the front door to leave. Well, he tried to- before Lollipop's voice stopped him.

"Oh, and Gelatin?"

"Hm?" He turned around.

"Remember; the fork helps. It doesn't do any harm." She reassured. "Everything's going to be okay."

⚠

Pain soared through Snowball with every passing second. Attempting to unfurl his clenched muscles, he struggled through the heaviness that kept his eyelids shut, wincing from the light that struck at his eyes.

The memories would fade in and out. Again. And again. Everything that had taken place before would sprint past his gaze, before it slipped into his unconsciousness. Wheezing, he shakily tried to lift his hand to his face in order to rub the exhaustion out of his eyes.

Nothing.

Grunting, he tried again. Come on- wake up, just wake up and get back up.

Nothing.

There goes his efforts.

Slowly coming to his senses, he blinked, keeping his body still so the remaining pain could dissipate from his system. Moments pass, before he tries to move once more.

Moving his limbs required an incredulous amount of effort, more so than he could remember; so many parts of him screamed with agony, and when his eyes welcomed his surroundings, the pool of crimson red snapped him out of his haze.

Snowball looked down. He wished he hadn't when his eyes met his upper arm, shivering as bits of flesh dangled in the elbow, connecting to, what should have been, his lower arm.

It was gone.

HIs arms- they were gone.

All the exhaustion that tugged at Snowball dissipated; in its wake, tsunamis of impending doom crashed at his soul, as a mind-splitting headache cracked through his skull. He looked down, his chest beginning to rise and fall at a rapid pace as he realized that both of his arms and legs had been sawn clean off, a sea of crimson pooling around his body.

That's when the pain struck. Shouting, he forced himself to keep still, his pained gasps for air echoing through the haunting garden. He let his eyes capture the damage that had been done, and to his horror, his limbs hadn't only been cut off but ripped off halfway.

With the winds picking up, the rustling of the leaves hissed through the atmosphere, causing him to shiver. Beads of sweat oozed down the sides of his head, and he couldn't help but try and push through the pain, doing everything he could to get himself out of there.

But any effort was futile.

And the more that he tried, the more his sweat would ooze down his face.

Trembling like a leaf, Snowball looked around the garden, his heart rattling in the center of his ribcage. That puddle of brain matter only meant that he was near Tree- but Grassy...?

He looked towards the right.

The kid was planted into the ground. His blades, which once sprung with life, now curled and drooped with agony, blood staining the edges as his wounds continued to fertilize the Earth below him.

Here he was.

They had been searching... for so long...

But he had been-..

Wincing, Snowball gritted his teeth, grunting through the headache. He noticed Grassy's eye staring right back at him, widening with a faint highlight of horror. This caused the object to try and turn- only to realize there was nobody there.

He thought he was staring at someone.

Why was the kid looking so scared..?!

What was she going to DO?!

Peeking over the trees, I watched as Snowball frantically shifted in his spot, grunting and hissing at, what I could assume was, the pain. The way his upper arms- those stubs- frantically wiggled and moved were enough to make my arms ache.

That is, until the pain subsided. She was the one in charge of that.

'Well,' she giggled. 'I think it's time we do this in style.'

"I think I'm going to be sick..."

'Ugh. Seriously?'

"You never did this with the others..."

'That's because I wasn't at risk of being caught. They died permanently since that recovery center broke down.'

"Why can't we do something easier...?"

'Easier..?' Her laughter reverberated through my being. "EASIER?! You expect me to go 'easier' on these biodegradable IDIOTS?! They destroyed my garden- my CHANCE to-...'

Her words stop, as she takes a deep breath. I take a breath for her.

'...I'm going to make sure they feel what I have felt... oh... and I won't EVER let them forget this pain.'

Shivering, I clench my fists. I have to remind myself of the promise she had made; safe, I repeat, they are safe. If I have the freedom to choose who I go for- to follow her demands- then they won't have to face it all. Not again. Not ever.

I look up. "How should we do this..?" I ask.

'....'

"Hello...?"

'Let's approach this brute with an open mind now... alright...?'

Open mind. That's my cue.

I look to my side, hesitantly grabbing the hand weeder that I had found in the shed. Pin really had everything she needed to make her garden happen... at least, a garden that they had all envisioned differently.

Did she feel the way I feel, right now? Did she stare at these tools, knowing that they'd be digging into the flesh of everyone we knew, rather than the soil below?

Was she scared, too?

I can't approach him too quickly. I look around, and in a few seconds, I spot a small branch and use my foot to break it in half. This grabs his attention, his head immediately whirling towards my direction.

My name comes out in the form of a stutter.

I know, Snowball. I'm just as shocked, too.

"W-What the hell are you doing?!" *he sputters out.*

"I can't hold this against you. You weren't there when it happened." I assured, hiding the weeder behind me. It was a poor effort; all he needed to do was take a look around to realize what was going on.

"What... oh my flake, you..."

I turn away.

"You fucking bitch..."

When the swear falls upon our 'ears', I pout, tossing him a glare. "Language," I utter.

"You're doing this?! You're making this happen AGAIN?! WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?!"

"Maybe you should ask that question to yourself."

"...Is this about-"

"They did nothing. She didn't do anything- he didn't do anything- none of them did anything for you to beat them up like that."

"Those weaklings were in my way."

"And you thought it was okay to hurt them...?"

"YOU'RE LECTURING ME ABOUT HURTING PEOPLE?! LOOK AT THIS- I- WHAT ARE YOU ON ABOUT?!"

"I don't want to do this to you..."

"YOU CUT MY LIMBS OFF!!"

"And now you know what it feels like... to be a weak, armless loser." The words come off my tongue before I can think twice.

I stare at his head. Not even his head- his exposed brain, which oozed blood down the sides of his face. He catches me staring, and I can practically see the rage fuming from his face.

"THE FUCK ARE YOU LOOKING AT?!"

"Nothing."

"WHAT- WHAT DID YOU-" *His eyes roll up, desperately trying to glimpse at the sight that was painted before me. I hesitate to try and speak, but my head twitches, and a smile lifts onto my face.*

"Golfball was right," I snicker, a tone that... is it... my own? "You really do have a tiny little brain."

I watch his expression. At first, he stares at me, antagonized by the statement that unfurled before him.

His eyes then fall, a perplexing look blanketing over him as beads of blood dripped down the side of his face.

Oh. He must have thought it was sweat. Because it wasn't until he noticed the droplets of red, falling from the top of his head, when his face then twists into a ghastly, frightened look, his eyes bulging out of their sockets as realization dawned over him.

I don't blame him for screaming. It tunes out, and I stare at him, my eyes following the path my trowel had sliced, all around his upper head, which was now removed. Instead of being met with the sight of his skull, I stare at his now-exposed brain, watching as blood and fluids leaked from its folds.

Splitting the skull by its suture lines wouldn't leave my mind.

He continues to panic, his stumps waving frantically. Carefully, I step towards a bush of now blooming lilacs, letting my hand stretch into the intertwining branches. Once I feel the flesh, I pull it out, soon cradling the top of his skull in my arms.

"Don't worry," I assured. "It's being put to good use."

"MY HEAD!" *he screamed, causing the voice to giggle.*

'Never knew he could sound so... desperate...'

I wince. "Please don't start with that."

'Hey! I have a right to enjoy this. And SO should you.'

"He deserved to be-"

'No. He didn't deserve anything BUT this. He hurt them- just like you said! And... oh... he was one of them...'

"One of who?!"

'One of the fools... who burned my garden.'

A shiver runs through my body. She didn't want to merely kill him; she needed to leave a mark... in his mind.. and his being.

Snowball sniveled, his eyes bloodshot from the pain as he shakily looked back towards me. "W-Why... Why are you doing this..." *he asks.*

Somehow, the question ticks me off enough to speak above a whisper. "You wouldn't understand."

"Oh, I understand PLENTY, bitch," *he growled.* "You're following Pin's footsteps, aren't you? And for what? Just to prove yourself..?!"

"Prove myself?"

"W-We've seen how PATHETIC you were, ever since we first met. There was NOTHING special about you- always falling underneath someone else's shadow."

No.

He wasn't telling the truth. It's just who he was- a brute, a bully- none of his words were true.

..They cared. Everyone did. I know how much they care about me, I was

more than someone living underneath a shadow; I was my own person. My own identity, someone so special.

I shake my head, speaking through my clenched jaw. "No..."

"No?! Hah, PLEASE. EVERYONE can see it; you like to think you're some valuable member of the team, when in reality, you're nothing more than a NOBODY. You want to feel some sort of recognition- you want to feel SEEN."

"I'M SOMEONE SPECIAL TO THEM! ALL OF THEM!" I scream. "I'M SEEN- I'M LISTENED TO!"

"Please. You'll be SEEN, alright. And trust me- they'll make sure to HANG your bloodied body in the city, once they find out what YOU'VE DONE."

That was it.

Any hope I had vanished in the blink of an eye, hope for him to have a chance to listen, to hear what I had to say.

His words fell into an incomprehensible gibberish, and the memories of their words begin to slip through my hold.

Did they care..?

Did any of them... really care..?

....

'..I'm so sorry you had to find this out, dear. I truly am.'

'But remember... with my help... not only will they be safe... they'll finally be sure to listen.. to see you, for who you wish to be.'

'Do you really want him to leave with the upper hand, here...?'

All of my senses break past the barrier, flooding through the course of my veins. My hand snaps up, clenching the hand weeder before stabbing it into the back of his brain.

I can hear him yell- only for a second- and from the looks of it, he doesn't seem to notice that his brain has been stabbed. His body jolted, a faint puff of air whooshing from his mouth, which hung agape.

Quickly, I looked to see where the weeder had struck.

'Huh... good aim, darling.'

"I didn't mean to-"

'Hey! You struck the right nerve! It'll keep him stiff, at least. Makes it a lot easier for the both of us!'

"What..?"

'Oh! Go for the front!'

My hand rises once more, forcing the weeder out of the back, before it stabs right back in. His face contorts, a gargle breaking through his throat.

"Here..?!"

'Yes!! Oh- Something must be playing in his mind right now- he's as stiff as a statue!'

I pause. "..Now what do I do..."

'The seeds. Do you have them?'

I glance down, meeting the little crater of seeds that I had salvaged from the shed. "Yes..."

'....Get to planting, then.'

" "WOOAAH!"

Snowball recalls his hands shoving against another object's back. He can't

tell who it was- they were too much of a blur to make out- but from the nasally scream, he watched as she tumbled all the way down the cliff, splashing into the canal below.

Bossy bot. Bossy bot?

Was that... someone he knew?

Glaring. At least- until a voice caught him off his guard.

"Good one!"

He turned back. More blurred faces- all stepping back in fear of his anger- yet one of them struck him the most.

The red block smiled. Smiled?

... "

I'm focused as I continue to shove the seeds into the folds of his brain, until Snowball lets out a cackle, causing me to gasp. The seeds nearly fall from my hold, until I clasp my hand into a fist, keeping them from tumbling down.

"What's going on?!" I ask.

'Huh- looks like you've hit a spot there, dear!'

"I..."

"The frontal lobe has all his memories. All of his feelings- you've jabbed your way to his funny bone there! I mean- just look at him!'

"Is he supposed to be-"

'-Laughing? If you hit the spot, he must've remembered something funny! At least, to him. You know how stupid he can be- just look at the size of

his brain!'

I reach over, carefully pulling the weeder to the side. His face twitches, his eyelids flickering up and down as he continues to cackle, his laughs filling the air around us. I can hear Grassy whining, raising his severed forearm to try and reach for his father, to no use.

'You see now..? This isn't such a bad way to go...'

I clamp my lips shut. Carefully, I continue to work, jabbing the weeder through each and every fold in his brain. I make easy work of slipping the seeds into the right spot, ones that would get the plants growing sooner rather than later.

But my heart drops. His wheezing chortles continue, when, for a split second, I see a pair of red claws grasping at my wrists, aiding in my movements. As quickly as they came, they vanished, leaving me stunned.

'Hey,' she snaps. 'Get back to it!'

"O-Okay, okay..."

Pulling the weeder out, I hover it over another portion of his brain, before I jab it through the layers of flesh.

" "Snowball!"

He hears his name. So damn familiar- he couldn't tell who it was, but he instinctively turned to face the faceless cube before him.

"Huh? What's going on?"

Darkness surrounded them. It should have been a sign to flee- but here, it was safe. Something told him that it was.

Grinning, the red cube held something behind him. "You know how things have been boring around here?"

Boring? Snowball raised his eyebrow.

"Yeah."

"Well- I just met someone who could solve that in an INSTANT!"

Someone? He didn't know why- but this was something he HAD to see.

Sitting himself up, Snowball would nod. "Go ahead," he said. "Show them!"

With a clean swing, the red block holds out... well...

He couldn't tell. It was another faceless object- but blades would wiggle in and out of his view, with a green hue melting into the blurred aura around him. A giggle fills the air around him, and he blinks.

"...Who's that?"

"Hi!" The bundle giggled. "I'm Grassy!" "

A wail?!

I look down, and my heart drops. Why did it drop? I know how rude Snowball can be- but he's still an object! He can cry, too!

Then why was it so... unnerving..?

His eyelids twitched, as sobs struck through the atmosphere, sending a chill all around me. I clench my teeth, forcing myself to look away.

"I-I need to stop."

'Hey! You're doing great! Another perfect spot!'

"I'm just poking and jabbing! It's all the same, isn't it?!"

'Ugh- Do you even HAVE a brain?!' I could feel her rolling her eyes at me.

Wincing, I lower my head in shame before she forces it back up.

'Just another nerve, dear. Remember- he can't feel a thing. You're doing great.'

Grassy's whining fills my head once more. I shake my head. "Can't we just-"

'Keep digging, now.'

I yank the weeder out, only this time, blood splashes onto me. Nausea constricts around my stomach, my breaths becoming rapid as I shut my eyes, bringing the weeder down as hard as I could.

A squelch echoed through the garden.

" It was somewhere in the Darkness. He couldn't recall where, or when; all he saw was darkness, with a few objects standing out, as they were seated closer to him.

Days upon weeks were spent in the dark. How did he even feel about it? Was it- anger..? No, it had to be frustration. Annoyance..?

Hearing everyone talk over one another did get on his nerves.

Sitting against the walls, he remembered spacing out, hoping that this would let time pass more sooner than he could imagine. It was something he always found himself doing during those days- now, he feels a hand carefully blanket over his, making him blink back from his mind.

That red block.

He took Snowball's hand, a smile on his face. Words were said. He can't remember anymore- his lips forming words that were now impossible to decipher, presenting a puzzle, where the pieces now scatter in the mush of his aching brain.

Words. No- he remembered. He knew what Blocky told him that day- nobody could see them in the dark, it was a chance for him to finally try and-

No, not now. Don't slip away, don't-

There it goes.

Footsteps. He heard the kid laughing, sprinting across the darkness into the embrace of an orange ball...

Who was she again..?

Wait- no- he remembered- he knew who she was! She... okay, maybe not her name. But he remembered.

She cared for the green bundle of blades. For everyone. Even for him.

That ball cared for him. He can see it now. He looks up, trying to get a glimpse of her, but the red block sighs, and he looks back down.

He pulls Snowball closer. There goes his heart, beating faster than he could ever imagine. What did he say to have him feel this way?

Snowball was no charmer; this was his-.. best.. friend..?

His name... Don't forget his name...

Grunting, he finds himself hugging the red block. He doesn't know why. Despite this, he recalls the way his face burned as the red block wrapped his arms around him.

The way he looked at him then.

....

Block... Blocky..?

....

"...don't you ever forget it..."

What...

"You make me.. believe in this love shit..."

Blocky...

"..I love you."

...

That's when he realizes; it was him.

It was always him.

Why couldn't he say it then..?

He wanted him. "

"I... I don't.. like girls." *Snowball warbled, the corners of his mouth dropping into an agonized frown. I can't stop my eyes from widening at the statement.*

He was gay. He finally admitted it- he was...

What did I hit..?

I look down. The weeder dug into the crevices of his brain, blood continuing to paint over the grey of its metal coat. His head trembled, trying to move itself around, yet he quickly gave in as Blocky's name left his mouth.

Oh, I think to myself. It was him he fell for...

'Clearly, darling!'

"W-What did I..."

'The medial prefrontal cortex! Well, more like the frontal lobe- looks like you dug at the right spot- he's starting to come to terms with himself here,

haha!'

Wincing, I had the strength to rip the weeder from the front of his brain. Blood splashed against my arms, and when I look down, I can see that his eyes were red, glossy with the tears that wept from his core. Or from the pain.

"I'm gay," *he whispered. My heart sinks as I give him a weakened smile.*

"..It's okay. That's okay. I promise."

"T-Tell.. Tell Blocky.. please.."

"I..." My hands fumble with the handle of the weeder. His words ring through the silence of the garden, where we stood alone, conscious enough to understand what was happening.

This was new to me. I had never seen him speak with such carefulness- he was vulnerable, telling me something that he had possibly hidden for his entire life.

And now, here he was. Realizing his truth, with his blood on my hands.

"Blocky.." *Blood driveled down the corner of his mouth. The mere mention of his name makes Grassy whimper, his head weakly turning from side to side, causing the gash on his throat to slowly rip with every move.*

"G-Grassy... no..." *Snowball whispers, shakily raising his dismembered stumps towards him.*

I couldn't.

No, I couldn't do this-

I step back, my jaw clenching as I forced myself to crack through the stiffness which overtook my body. I try to make my fingers let go of the hand weeder, but I see that red hand grab at my wrist, yanking me back towards the ball of snow.

'I'm getting really tired of this, you know.'

"I... I..."

'I-I- what, huh?? Have you learned NOTHING?!'

"Please- w-we've done enough... let's just leave him, he-"

'Oh, sure! Let's just leave the idiot here with his brain out in the open! I'm sure he won't bother to try and scream out for help, huh?!'

"This is too much...!"

'And you're going to have to learn how to DEAL WITH IT.'

My hands develop a mind of their own. Rising into the air, my fingers constrict the wooden handle of my weeder, before swinging down into the back of Snowball's brain. A squelch echoes around me, his face twitching sporadically as my hand jerks the stick with violent movements, digging deeper, and deeper, into the core of his mind.

I could feel vomit creeping at the back of my throat. Unable to stop the tears, I try to look away, only to feel something force my head downwards, keeping my face clear towards him- even if it would be the last one he'd ever see.

She did this on purpose. I know she did.

Once my movements come to a gradual stop, his twitching snaps into an expression I've become familiar with, ever since the day we had met: animosity.

"You bitch..." *he hissed, unable to stop himself from shivering. My eyes narrow.*

"What..."

"YOU MONSTER! YOU- FUCKING MONSTER!!"

A few seconds pass, and he proceeds to scream. I know these screams all too well; his angered tirades and hateful gibberish were something everyone had grown used to. Yet, as I stand here, drenched in the blood that poured endlessly from his open wounds, I feel myself shivering from the way his anger spiked.

He always had his limit. It was who he was- Snowball's outburst were followed with post-anger clarity, leaving him with a gaping emptiness that was usually taken on by his anger.

Now, his anger boiled on his face. His voice roared with every passing second, and I could hear his vocal cords ripping with every word that shot from his mouth.

"AFTER EVERYTHING THEY'VE DONE FOR YOU?!"

I clench the hand weeder.

"WE TRUSTED YOU!"

Tears trickle down my face, washing them from the splattered stains of blood.

"JUST WAIT UNTIL THEY FIND ME- OH, JUST YOU WAIT- THIS WON'T BE THE LAST TIME YOU'LL FUCKING SEE ME!"

"You're right," I whisper. "Because you're never leaving this garden."

"HAH?! YOU THINK I'M GOING TO L E A V E...?!" He sneered. "THEY'RE GOING TO FIND US. ALL OF US- AND THEY WON'T HESITATE TO BURN THIS FUCKING PLACE TO THE GROUND, WITH YOU INSIDE OF IT!"

At his words, I find my body going cold. Her eyes had become mine once more, as my pupils shrink, suddenly locking back onto his livid expression.

I speak. I try to. Is it her trying to?

"WHAT." *He smirked, his eye twitching.* "DID I STRIKE A NERVE....?!"

"Stop." I'm begging. I'm begging you.

"OH, WE WON'T STOP- I WON'T STOP UNTIL THIS PLACE IS UP IN FLAMES!"

The air shatters with his screams. It makes me stumble, the feeling in my body draining at his words, and I soon find myself standing with a void, an empty sensation of where my emotions had once resided.

So when the barbed wires of acrimony wrap around that void, I find myself sobbing. No noise broke past my mouth, no tear slid down its usual path.

It's when I realize it wasn't my anger.

It was hers.

"FUCKING KILL ME. KILL ME FOR ALL I CARE. BUT REMEMBER THIS."

Please.

"WHEN THEY FIND OUT, THEY'RE GOING TO KILL YOU. THEY'LL BURN YOU ALIVE, THEY'LL BURY YOU HERE WITH THE REST OF US!"

No.

"AND WHEN THEY DO?! HA- THIS GARDEN WILL BURN! IT WILL BURN, OVER AND OVER AGAIN!"

I twitch.

"I'VE BURNED THIS PLACE TO THE GROUND ALREADY."

Don't. Don't do this.

"REDUCED IT TO ASH."

She clenched the weeder.

"AND IF I HAD A CHANCE TO DO IT AGAIN?!"

We step forwards.

"I'LL GLADLY TAKE IT! THIS DESERVES TO BURN DOWN TO HELL, WHERE IT WILL STAY."

Minutes ago, I thought I was weak. He said I was weak, a nobody, someone who lived beneath someone else's shadow. But he underestimates the harm that she can do- the harm that I can do- if he pushes me past my limit.

I lunge the hand weeder into the center of his throat, raking it all around his throat to slit it. But I don't stop there- I continue to drag the blade all the way around, stopping at the very back of his 'neck'. Blood clouds his usual snowy hue as it trailed down his body, his gargles and squelched coughs fueling the irritability I had gained.

With a forceful movement, I yank the weeder upwards, watching as the cut ripped from the back of his 'neck', up through the lower back of his head, all the way to the top. We both grunt, although I feel no pain, as I use my fingers to dig into the lower halves of his skull, ripping them from his exposed flesh. I feel a shower of blood splatter over me, yet I pay no mind to it.

Then I see the cerebellum. I hiss, forcefully stabbing the weeder into the lobe, before yanking out, only to stab it, over and over again. I stab it once. Twice. Three times. Six. Ten. I lose track.

He makes horrible, horrible noises, ones that I may have heard, if I had the nightmares, and his face twitches and contorts, blood driveling down his open mouth. I stare at the mangled organ before me, until I get a glimpse of a long, tube-like organ, connecting from his brain, down through his neck.

I know I shouldn't, hesitancy faintly tugging at my shaking hands. But it's now my job to. It's my destiny. It's who I must become. To prove him wrong- to show everyone that I was more than what they see me as.

I'm the next to build this garden, and it's too hard keeping any sense of myself from vanishing.

I don't just cut it. No, that would be merciful. Instead, I slit gaping smiles into the stem, watching as they opened with a torrent of fluid rushing down the wound. From two to seven, I make as many as I can, soon grabbing a handful of seeds that rested at my side.

And I shoved them in. One by one, more if they were able to fit. I see the same red claws, gripping tightly at my wrists until they vanish in a mere blink. So I continue. Whether she controlled me or not.

I find myself slowly coming to, my chest aching terribly with the tears swelling in my soul. Cry, I command myself. Just cry it out.

Nothing. My head aches so badly I stop straining myself, lifting myself from the soil and taking a few steps away from the scene. The soil, which now had blades of grass blooming, glistened with the coating of Snowball's blood, his wounds continuing to gush as the Yoylite's glow pulsated.

That's when I realized he had stopped screaming. No noise came from him, his eyelids hanging unevenly with his pupils glazing over from the carnage I had caused. His chest continued to rise and fall, and as a small gag came from him, I exhaled, letting the tension drain from my lungs.

.....

The garden is quiet now. No breeze trailed through, with the rustling of the trees falling silent, all standing as witnesses to my crimes. I glared down at Grassy, who now had tears torrenting down his sunken cheek.

I think... I think I'm starting to hate him.

Hate.

That was really new.

....It's not as scary as I thought it'd feel.

His screams. They continue to echo in the back of my mind.

He will burn it again, he said.

He'll set this garden ablaze.

Reduce it to ash.

Ash.

No.

'No.'

Time is now too difficult to understand. I walk, the sun lowering into the horizon when voices fill the ringing in my head. The others- doing their

own thing. Walking. Talking. Hands in hands.

Hands.

Dirt turns into pavement. I can't stop this; all the anger that churned before was drained from me, leaving that empty space for her to fill. I try to stop myself from walking, but she forces me to trot through the streets.

Funny. I... I'm starting to lose the fear I once felt. It wasn't her just taking control, it was more of an alternating pattern between the two of us.

Alternating.

I recognize the sign of the shop before me. We step in, not hesitating to trail through the ghostly isles.

The trowel was set in my bag. She was right about it becoming handy. Maybe that was her speaking, but it felt more comfortable than using a knife.

We pass food. Water. Snacks and essentials.

Soon, we find what I need.

It's strange. From oil, to a fine powder. Gasoline?

Accelerator liquid....

A lighter.

She whispers to me. 'Wait until the sun goes down.'

And I stay.

The sky begins to melt into colorful hues, shifting ever so gently with the usual yellow mixing with orange, then purple, soon falling into the deep blue of the night. All the stars watch as I step into the frigid air of the slumbering city, my legs taking me down the path that I had come across before.

Flashes of the fight return. I pass the square. Stumble past familiar houses.

It's late into the night when I stare at the singular window on the top floor,

it's light sticking out like a sore thumb. I see Rocky, who stares at the stars, his eyes shimmering with wonder. Something catches his attention; he turns around, walking away as a balloon- Balloony- walked by, carefully draping the curtains over its surface, dimming the light that pierced through the darkness.

I wait for, what feels like, hours, until I watch the light flick off, quickly blending the final window with the others that were patterned on the hotel's walls. Every window had an occupant. An object. Someone she had yet to know.

The sign of the building blinks, its lights emitting a hushed glow. I take it in for a moment, before her commands flood through my skull.

'Go inside.' She whispers.

I lead myself towards the doors, quietly pulling them open. Darkness welcomes me, and once the door comes to a close, my mind goes blank.

She's in the lead, now.

Not new, never new.

I wish it was.

I'm trapped. Trapped in the echoing chamber of my body for, what feels like, hours. Whenever I arrive here, there is nothing else I can do, but wait for her to let go, for me to crash back into my own control. I close my eyes, and brief images flash in my view.

Flicking gas stoves on. Tanks being pierced. Stabbing her trowel into pipes. Doors, darkness, an electrical box.

'You know,' she speaks, menacingly. 'I've always dreamt of doing this.'

I don't answer. Her comments do nothing,

'This will be nothing more than a tragedy. Trust me... it will be easier for you to kick your plan into full swing.'

They'll be recovered, I think.

'Recovered, yes... but we aren't just letting them go that quickly. No... they have to feel what they have done.'

The garden. Her vengeance courses through the air around me, and I no longer speak.

More images flicker in my line of sight, but I am too tired to decipher them. I can hear the faint noises of crashing and dismantling, with the smell of gasoline filling my 'nose', but I let my thoughts bring me back to the past.

Before everything.

My friends. Everyone. Safe, and happy. Peaceful, and serene. The more the senses return, the more I find myself clinging to the memories, listening to the joyous conversations that carry a blissful ignorance, one I wish I could return to.

Until I blink.

I find that I'm back outside, the moonlight washing upon my aching body. Spots of char and dirt stain my body, my hands now having dust and oil blanketing over their surface.

"What..?" I whisper, looking left and right. She notes my confusion, quickly speaking over me.

'Don't lose your mind, dear. This last step is going to be simple!~'

"Simple..?"

As if on command, my hand trails into the bag, reeling out the lighter that sat hidden at the bottom. Usually, she'd giggle, or say some type of joke about my next few steps when it came to any plan of ours.

Now, she spoke, her voice heavy with ire.

'A simple flick, and you let it fall.'

I stare at the lighter. "You want me to turn it on... and... let it fall..?"

'Look down.'

Oh. That's what she meant- I didn't see the trail of gasoline that started before me, stretching all the way towards the entrance of the building.

My lips press together. Someone could be there- someone I-

'Come on. Do it.'

For a brief moment, my mouth opens to defy her. Yet, I can feel her eyes drilling holes into the core of my skull, and my thumb carefully rests on the lighter's ignition.

'He wanted to burn my garden...?'

One click. Nothing.

'They think they can just, reduce it to ash and char...?'

Another click. Nothing.

'Let's see how they feel if they're all forced to burn...'

The pipes were now burst open, gas permeating through the enclosed building.

"...Burn in something that they've created."

Burn.

Gasoline coated every inch of that floor.

Burn.

All the Exit signs, dismantled and destroyed.

Burn.

My hand flicks the lighter, the flame dancing ever so gently with the trembling of my own hand. I feel the tears returning in my eyes, and for a second, I try to step back-

'Light it up.'

It slips free, and I watch as the flames expand, snaking up towards the

sign, its letters flickering from the current of the heat.

But, before the chaos- before the inevitable- I think back to what I can remember.

And that's when I realize what I have done.

We read the name under my breath.

*"**LIVE HOTEL**".*

No. NO. NO!

NEVER TRUST UNIVERSITY WI-FI. THATS WHY IM LATE IM SORRY!!!

pineapples are. in my head.... got nobody cause I'm braindead.....

Hi everyone! That song is such a bop.

I know I said an hour later but um. Posting it now teehee. Another chapter?!? I may be on a roll today. Big brain hours (Snowball may relate, or not)

Fun fact: this was written while I was experiencing some of the worst pains in my life. I honestly just remember sitting down, typing away on my laptop, and then I space out for a like a good minute until I realize that the chapter is finished. So then I was like, "cool! Lets give this a read!" and after doing so, I stared at my screen in horror for a good five minutes. It even made me lightheaded!

Also, so sorry for being gone for a bit. Senior year of college is really kicking my ass here, as is the ADHD. My mental health hit a huge low and I needed a week to get myself out of it- which I did! Hooray

OKAY.... I've yapped. Enjoy your suffering because it only gets worse!

bye!!!

-ice

Miss You Always,

Pin,

I think I'm an idiot.

My love for you has finally gotten me out of my shell. I forgot how nice spring was- not too hot, not too cold- just the right weather.

At the same time, I realize that my love for you has made me selfish.

Now, don't get me wrong- I don't feel bad for taking Firey's snacks. The guy used to go through the pantry in the span of a few DAYS- I even told Leafy that a lock wouldn't be a bad idea to preserve the food we do have!

She immediately rejected it. Even I can't believe it- the poor thing is too kind for her own good! Leafy's often the one who gets the snacks for the three of us, grabbing as many as she can so we can get through the week. But because of me, she's been having to go more often than not.

Wait- no, not me. It's Firey's fault! I swear, I would've kicked him to the curb at this point!

.....Okay, maybe not.

This is what I mean. I'm becoming selfish- my thoughts are orbiting around you. I've been too upset to try and check on our friends...

Oh! ~~Our friends! My friends!~~

Our friends!

You're not going to believe this. I ran into Fries today, and guess what: he's planning on making growtato's again! He's still being a grouch about 'keeping them for his survival', but, cmon'- he made some for Gelatin last time. He should make some again, ~~for all of us!~~

I bet you're wondering as to who keeps leaving those supplies in the forest. Well... surprise! It was all me.

You have no idea how hard it was to try and find a place where I could leave the food, especially when everyone seems so watchful nowadays. There's got to be something in the air, because lately, the others have been acting rather... tense.

They still don't know! Nobody knows about your whereabouts right now, thankfully. But with everyone being on edge, I'm going to have to find a better way to drop that food off. That's how I found out about Fries's little farm again, heh- he ran into me when I was walking back.

Don't worry though. Even if they try and build some kind of forcefield around here, it won't stop

I would have gone off with you. Believe me, it feels like Golfball is trying to get me every time I'm near. Apparently she was really hesitant on bringing me back- it's more than enough to make me leave.

But that'd result in a witch hunt for the both of us.

I'm so sorry it all had to be this way. I know that, no matter what, you'll never be able to escape what you've done.

None of us will.

It's weird. I've found myself holding onto the scar, the spot where I drove the trowel into- and every time that I do, I can feel your hold, your hand cradling my own.

~~I finally told someone that I had killed myself. That it wasn't you.~~

They still care, you know. I could tell- Fries hinted at it when I ran into him. He did try to cover it up and all, but just from the way he looked, I knew that I... wasn't the only one.

..I care.

I care about you. I can say it now.

We've all suffered so much, but it's time we finally begin to heal together,

for ourselves as well as our friends around us.

We're all starting to find some peace.

I hope you're finding it too.

...Maybe one day I'll have the courage to leave these letters with you.

Sincerely,

Missing you always,

Coiny

As Pin walks through the forest, the songs of the insects echo with the wind, the moonlight guiding her back to her spot.

Her spot; a safe haven. A new home?

Home.

She shook her head. Before she could settle in for the night, she would organize the groceries and snacks that she had found, hidden away beneath a thicketed path, one that she had come across after her first night here.

Today, fate had gifted her with some tangerines, chips, yoyleberries, pastries, bread, and water.

Water! A smile lifted at the corners of her mouth. Just when she was running low on it...

The trip to the canal would have been too risky, day and night. Especially at night. For the darkness of the woods held unseen dangers that Pin couldn't find herself facing.

Hell- bugs resided in the grounds of these parts- she couldn't risk getting herself killed.

She quickly opened the bottle, her parched throat washing with relief as she drank as much as she could. The faint headache that tugged at her mind would vanish, and soon, she had the energy to get herself up, placing everything in a neat pile of the small cave.

Vines blanketed over the entrance, keeping her hidden from any eyes that could be in sight. Yet, it didn't shroud her in darkness- once the sun rose, it was enough to let her bask in the rays of light, reminding her that she was back.

That she was free. Finally free.

...

But... she was alone.

When the tears prick at the corners of her eyes, she huffs, pressing her palms against them. Any tears that threatened to escape were wiped away, and she brushed herself off, carefully brushing the vines aside. She stepped out, carrying the scraps of her previous weeks fruit into another spot within the trees, until the smell of smoke causes her to freeze.

Smoke?

No.

Her head whirls around, scanning the darkness as best as she could- until a faint glow catches her attention. She wastes no time backing away, until she realizes that it was not moving.

It only glowed brighter... slowly, but surely.

There was no way the night went by so quickly. Confused, the scraps slipped from her hold, as she trailed down the path, brushing path

the towering trees and sneaking by the familiar thickets that warned her of the path ahead.

The path that led to the city.

She looks down. Could she...? It wasn't like anyone was near.

Her foot hesitantly stretches towards the graveled path, until the sound of an explosion made her jump. Any thoughts that held her back had perished, for she was now sprinting down the graveled dirt, many familiar sights soon melting back into her view.

She remembered what happened here.

She....

No.

Not important.

Keep running.

Keep RUNNING!

For a second, Pin wishes that she hadn't gotten so curious. She turned to stone, her breaths coming to a stop as the horizon revealed the entirety of the city.

Which was a shame.

In the distance, she could see the flames stretching towards the sky, the smoke clouding over the moon and drifting towards the woods. From the looks of it, one of the buildings was burning to a crisp, the glow flooding the slumbering air of Yoyle City. Faint screams and wails echoed from the scene, enough to make her stumble back in shock.

That's when the thought hits her. It stabs through her heart like a

sharpened blade, breaking her from her shock, as her hand clutched at her chest.

Her friends could be down there.

He could be down there.

Coiny..

"Coiny...!"

Fire Drill!

A few hours earlier...

When the doors opened, Bottle was greeted with the buzzing environment of the hotel.

Once sunset had begun to fall, it served as her cue to return to the city. Her search had lasted for quite a while, and despite the concern that came from the others, she refused to let their worries get in the way of her mission.

Besides, she knew that the others were trying to help. They were looking out for her well-being, and they wanted to do whatever they could to pinpoint any clues about Tree's disappearance. Days, to weeks, and with yet another disappearance taking the others minds off of him, she knew she had to persevere, no matter what.

Stepping into the hotel, many of the objects would turn to greet her. Bottle would quietly brush herself off, immediately placing a spare shovel to the side of the door.

"Bottle!" Barf Bag greeted, stepping towards the clear object. "How are you? Anything new on the case?"

Despite the stinging wound that was left in her heart, Bottle forced a small smile, rubbing the exhaustion out of her eyes. "Nothing new- not just yet..."

"You've been on the lookout for weeks!" Chiming in, Donut would step to Barf Bag's side, his hands cupping together.

"The city has been taking up most of the search time."

"Are you looking through the streets?"

"Yep. Inside the buildings, too."

"Oh my sap, you must be exhausted." Frowning, Barf Bag would reach for her hand, giving it a reassuring pat. "Is there anything we can do to make your day a little easier?"

The forcefulness that Bottle had to keep mellowed into a softer smile, a quiet sigh breaking past her mouth. "I think I just need some support. It's been a lot lately..."

"If it's support you want, it's support we'll help with." Pie's voice made the three turn, watching as she walked towards her. "After all- it's what we're here for."

Donut placed a hand on her shoulder. "Pie's right. If you need anything- we're all here to offer any kind of support you need."

Bottle knows this, but the face of pity on Donut and Barf Bag forms before her own eyes. Their empathy. Their condolences. She turned, letting her eyes blink away the tears that threatened to burst from her eyes.

"Thank you," she whispered. "It's... all I can really ask for."

"It's why you're here, after all." Pie smiled, her fingers closing around Bottle's with a soft caress. "We didn't want you to feel too isolated at home."

With Tree missing, Bottle found herself drifting away from the friendships that she had cultivated for herself. Don't get her wrong- she loved him, and missed him with every fiber of her being, yet the search was often accompanied by silence, without a single soul to accompany her.

So, when Pie offered her a stay at the Live Hotel, Bottle couldn't turn it away. She needed to be surrounded by noise; surrounded by familiar faces that nourished the spark in her soul. These weren't just her own friends- but they were his, too.

Sighing, Donut would lift his hand from her shoulder, carefully brushing into Barf Bag's hold with an instinctive movement.

"If there's anything else that comes up, don't be shy to come by our room," he offered. "Do you remember which one it was?"

The glass object would gaze up in thought. "...Room 212?"

"Yep! We're usually-"

"OHMYGOSH, LOSER!"

Excited shrieks and cheers drowned the words that Donut had. Turning, their eyes would fall upon the celebrity, even as he made his way towards the kitchen with that charming grin of his.

It's enough to make Barf Bag gasp, quickly grabbing Donut's hand with a grin. This caught him off guard, his eyes widening with bewilderment.
"Gah- Barfy!"

"OKAY BOTTLE, WE'LL CATCH UP LATER! BYE!!" Barf Bag exclaimed, dragging her lover away to get a chance to talk with the guy. Hell, he had only come down from his room to get himself something to eat; enough to make the entirety of the hotel follow him mindlessly.

She'll give this to Loser; he really does his best to help his fans feel a part of something grand, something that he could cultivate and share with them. His friendliness eases the racing minds of any soul around him, and his respect is unmatched for any other celebrity.

His presence leaves a memorable mark, no matter where he ends up going. And being here served as another reminder for Bottle- that no matter what, she had support, and it would be enough to help her with her search.

From Cake, who fawned excitedly over Loser's shoulder, to Eggy and Clock, who excitedly rambled about their day to the cube, it was enough to make Pie snicker. She turned, letting her gaze fall back onto Bottle's.

Her usual crystalline eyes were glazed over with melancholy. Carefully, she patted her hand against her back, resulting in a half-hearted sigh.

"The city is too grand for me to keep looking. But I've covered so much ground on my own, I've crossed so many paths on my list to see if he could've been there." Trying to convince herself, she hesitantly spoke, "He's okay. I'm sure he's okay."

"He could have gotten lost..." Pie suggested.

"I wouldn't be surprised. Without a map... it's more like a maze if anything."

It took Bottle a moment to realize the small lilt of sadness that slipped from her tone. She looked down, watching as Pie gave a heartened smile.

"Hey..." she began. "Why don't we help you get settled? I can let you play with my pet lizard again, if you'd like..."

"Really?" Bottle's eyes, which were once drained from any energy they had, quickly sparkled with fascination.

"Duh. Besides- she's really grown attached to you. I'm sure she'd love to see you again."

"Okay!"

"I think I've got enough crackers for the both of us... is there anything you'd like to get for a snack?"

"Cheese and crackers are just fine for me."

"If you say so!"

Bottle finds herself giggling, and Pie can't help but feel relieved, as it was something she hadn't seen from her in a while. Carefully, she leads the way around the hollering crowd that gathered in the kitchen, before she runs right into the back of another object, causing them to shriek in fear.

Pie staggers back, holding her head and letting her mind come to, all while processing the sudden walk-in. Bottle frowns, helping the shorter object collect herself before looking to see who she had walked into.

To her surprise, the sight of a small lizard made her gasp. Pie's words soon followed, as Woody cradled the little creature in his hands.

"Woody!" she greeted, waving her hand. "I'm sorry- I didn't see you there. This crowd is really something, dont'cha think?"

Hesitantly, the balsa slice would nod, his pupils shifting towards the crowd as Loser began to make his way back to the stairs. They watched as a few followers would scramble after him, while others would let him go, happily conversing with their acquaintances about the run in. Pie would smile, calmly watching as the golden cube stepped up the stairs, vanishing from her view.

"I can't believe he's living with the rest of us here," she acknowledged. Woody was quick to nod, unable to stop the excited smile that grew on his face.

Yet, Bottle watched as Woody's excitement came to a halt, his eyes widening as the smile slowly dropped into a wobbling frown. The scars on his face, on the other hand, would serve as a taunting reminder of what he was unable to do- his hand flying over his mouth to cover his scars in shame.

A sight that made the glass object frown. For a second, she found herself lifting her hand to brush over her right eye, unable to stop the thoughts of Tree from crashing into her mind. She didn't want to think about the possibility of him being-

No. Stop it. He isn't hurt.

He's out there. Safe. He was always one to be safe.

Seeing as to how he covered his scars, Pie would shake her head with a frown. "Woody, we've told you this before- you don't have to hide them..."

"Wah-wah.." Woody's babbles were muffled by his own hand, the other clutching onto Pie's lizard. A sympathetic smile would lift on the pastry's face, lifting her hand with an encouraging wave.

"It was something out of your control. You shouldn't have to feel so ashamed about them; it wasn't your fault that it happened.."

Another stutter. Bottle would chime in, seeing as he was frantically collecting the excuses as to try and hide himself from the group.

"We can't imagine how you must feel," she began. "But you don't have to keep yourself hidden away all because of the scars."

His eyes lifted, meeting hers.

"Those scars shouldn't define you for the kind of object you are. Nor are they a reminder of whatever happened in the past. They're going to fade away with time, and now that all of you are back, you have the chance to live a normal life again."

He whines, and Pie shook her head.

"Anyone who makes fun of you isn't worth your time."

"Pie's right, but you have to remember that there will always be objects who are- ones that want to help you as much as they can. Like us!"

Woody's head tilted to the side, curious by the taller object's statement. He didn't want to try and object their statements- he knew they were trying to be kind, but kindness was something he was still getting used to.

Was this another joke he would fall for?

Pie glanced down, her hand stretching over to caress the reptile in Woody's hold. It made the poor guy jump, settling down when he realized what the shorter woman was doing.

"Seems like they're liking you, too.." she chuckled. Although his hand continued to cover his mouth, Woody would let a smile grow underneath, his thumb caressing the lizards back with ease.

The lizard- which Pie had named Casper- let their tongue flick in response, resulting in a hushed giggle from Woody. With time, Pie would help him ease away from covering his mouth, his hand lowering once more in order to caress the scaly skin of the reptile.

Yet, Bottle found herself looking away, her eyes roaming throughout

the lobby of the hotel. The sky had now fallen into the hands of night, stars twinkling ever so softly through the windows. Faces, old and new, would roam around, getting their things, and making their way back towards their respective rooms.

She could see Saw, who leapt across the lobby before scooping both Taco and Lollipop into her arms. Gaty quickly followed her, equally as excited to see the two while Marker would brush past her, waving excitedly as he then reunited with Stapy. Foldy was at his side, happily rambling to both Liy and Remote as they looked through the kitchen for some late-night snacks. Eraser led Pen towards the staircase, rubbing his boyfriend's back as endless words of comfort danced from his tongue.

Another glance, and her eyes capture Bomby and Nickel, who lead Book towards the lobby. The guidebook had a smile on her face, one that Bottle hadn't recalled seeing in quite a while, as she helped Bomby adjust the ice pack on Nickel's cheek. She nodded, reassuring the two of something that Bottle couldn't quite capture, before turning towards the doors.

And then Bottle felt Pie pulling her towards the stairs, with Woody following on her other side, Pie's lizard blinking at the sights ahead of them. She felt as if she were in a dream, every familiar face around her whooshing by with the wind.

She let her head turn towards the lobby, catching a glimpse of the main doors coming to a gentle close, before the steps lead her towards their floor.

That night...

Mindlessly flipping through the pages of her sketchbook, Flower paused once she came across a certain page, carefully shifting it towards Ruby.

The two had felt as if they needed some time together, after the events that had unfolded earlier; they now laid on the grassy clearing of the city, a short distance from the New Clubhouse of the Freesmarters. Ruby was too hesitant on calling it a 'date', for it was too shabby for her girlfriend's taste.

Flower thought it was just perfect.

After all, they had the chance to watch the sunset together. Now, sitting beneath the stars, a lantern provided a soft glow in between them, assuring them of their presence in the moment.

It wasn't just the two of them; for Teardrop and Needle had agreed on tagging along, to try and ensure their safety, as well as the opportunity of a 'double date' between the couples. Mere feet away, the two laid on their own blanket, embracing one another as their eyes became lost in the sea of stars above.

"I remember this design," Flower shared, brushing her petal to the side. "I wonder if this could be a good one for me to... to touch up on."

Wincing, Flower found her voice fading away as she spoke. The punch that Snowball had given her damaged her windpipe more than she had originally thought, with her voice more raspier than it originally was. It took an incredulous amount of effort, yet she powered through, getting the words she needed out of her system.

"I like the sparkles.." Ruby admitted quietly, her eyes locked onto the sketchbook.

"Really? I was thinking of replacing them with sequins..."

"Sequins don't really give it a nice texture- stick with the glitter..."

When Ruby's words trickle into silence, Flower's head turns to face her girlfriend, her hand carefully blanketing over Ruby's.

"You okay?" Flower asked with a gentle tone.

Ruby's mouth opened, yet she held herself at a pause, her mind swimming relentlessly with her own thoughts. Her eyes remain

fixated on the sketches below, her lips slowly clamping shut as her attempts of speaking had slipped away from her.

"Are you tired..?" Flower asked, beginning to close the sketchbook. The gemstone shook her head, snapping her hand towards her lovers, stopping her from shutting it completely.

"Is something bothering you?"

Something. This was enough to make Ruby freeze, her lip puckering as her thoughts began to settle in like the scattered pieces of a puzzle. With a sigh, Flower would carefully move the sketchbook aside, taking Ruby's hands into her own.

"Let's just say what's bothering us at the same time!"

It was enough to make Ruby look up. Nodding, she would let their fingers carefully lock into place, their palms sharing the warmth that came from their own bodies. It served as a relief to Flower, reminding her that they were now safe and well, away from the past that haunted them relentlessly.

"Ready?" she asked.

The stars above the two watch, as Ruby nodded at her girlfriend's words. Reeling in a deep breath, the bloom would clear her throat, audibly counting down.

"One, two, three!"

"How long do I have to boil bread until it turns into toast?"

"I think we need to talk about Book-" Flower's words immediately came to a stop at Ruby's sentence, her eyes widening in confusion. "-...What?"

"Oh- that too!" Exclaimed Ruby, a nervous smile plastering over her face. "Sorry, I was thinking about the toast thing all day."

"....Ruby, what the pesticide-"

"Never mind that now!" Ruby looked down, her heart fluttering at the

name that stood at the tip of her tongue. "..Book... I wanted to-"

A stunning flash illuminated the atmosphere around them. Ruby found herself glancing up, wondering if dawn had come sooner than she had anticipated, until an indescribable force slammed against their bodies, a boom ripping through the city.

Ruby's head soon fills with a deafening ringing. Blinking, she finds the darkness settling back into the night, the taste of dirt returning to her senses. The world spins, much to her dismay, before a pair of arms yank her back onto her feet, her eyes quickly meeting those of her petrified girlfriend.

She could see her mouth screaming her name. Once, twice, perhaps even three times, until the screams begin to fill her mind.

"RUBY?! RUBY, ARE YOU OKAY?!"

"FLOWER- SHE'S AWAKE! LET GO OF HER!"

"DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO, NEEDLE! RUBY?!"

"W-Wha..?" A dazed stutter slipped past her mouth, and it was all Flower needed to embrace the gemstone, hugging her tightly against her chest. Blinking, Ruby's eyes darted around, trying to take in as much as she could around her.

It was supposed to be late; the moon was still high in the sky. When did it become so bright...?

Voices. Many began to overlap. She looked over, watching as Needle staggered back in horror, her hand lifting to point at the direction of the light.

"G-Guys..." she whispered.

Teardrop whirled around, rubbing the back of her head before they caught the smoke that began to steam into the air. The thick smog filled the droplet's heart with a sense of impending doom, her hands frantically signing something that Ruby couldn't quite understand.

And prior to her realization, footsteps would break into the air

around them, making her head turn.

Pencil. Match. Everyone she had seen.

Fries. Puffball. Leafy. Everyone she hadn't seen.

Everyone who was recovered was now rushing towards the group.

"What the hell was that?!" Fries shouted, noting the wide-eyed gemstone as she was shivering in Flower's arms. The corners of his mouth would drop into a frown, reaching towards her whilst Firey stepped in his way, his arm retracting from his heat.

"W-We don't know!" he exclaimed. "We were just asleep- and the next thing you know, BOOM!"

"No shit, Firey! It was obviously an explosion!" Coiny didn't hesitate to snap back, glaring at the flame before him.

"But where did it come from?!"

"USE YOUR EYES AND STOP ASKING THE OBVIOUS!"

"GRR!" Stomping towards the coin, he immediately raised his hand, swinging it down to slap him silly- at least, until Coiny snatched his wrist down, yanking him close towards his face.

He spoke lowly, his eyes dim with exhaustion and anger. "I'd be careful with what you do next, buddy."

"Make me, then," Firey smirked. Hissing at his response, Coiny would inch closer towards him, his eyes narrowing with anger as Match yanked him away.

"Like, enough already!" she shouted. "Now's, like, not the time to fight!"

At the sound of Match's voice, Firey was quick to step away from his sister- as much as it pained him to do so. The faint wave of heat that brushed near her was enough to make her flinch, her grip on Coiny loosening as he turned towards the rising glow of the city.

"There!" he shouted.

Leafy was quick to turn around, her hand instinctively reaching over to cup over Firey's. It brought the flame a tender sense of ease, even if it was for a mere second, before she turned to face him, her eyes shimmering with disquietude.

"S-Something must've exploded!" she shouted. "It looks like it's coming from the town square!"

His flames reflected off of Leafy's now-metal surface, as he looked up. "You don't think..."

"R-Ruby... Flower..."

The sound of a new voice made the group turn, gasping in horror as Book stumbled towards them, char and blood soaking her cover. Her back was beginning to catch on fire, yet she only forced herself forward, her arms trembling wildly as she felt herself slip away into the embrace of the bloom and gemstone in front of her.

"Fire..." was all Book could whisper, exhaustion washing over her as darkness enveloped her vision.

That's when all eyes returned towards the brightening glow in the distance, flames and fumes soaring into the night sky.

"...The hotel is on fire." Needle whispered, capturing the sight of the smoke. Teardrop's eyes widened, and in that instant, Leafy was the first to run.

"WE HAVE TO GO! COME ON!"

Seconds later, and the stampeding footsteps shatter through the peaceful city. Cradling Book, Flower's head whirls back and forth, trying to adjust to the darkness surrounding her. Ruby stays by her side, and she grabs her hand, her petrified eyes catching onto her gaze.

"This way!" she yelled. Needle is first to sprint after her, with Teardrop leading the group towards the scene.

Mere minutes passed, and the air had already brightened around them. Dawn was hours away, yet the raging fire descended upon their vision, with every crack unleashing the screams from within. Even from a distance, the heat that permeated from the building was enough to slap them in the face, screaming many warnings of the hell that unfolded before them.

Leafy was the first to run straight towards the fire. Instinctively, Firey would grab her, forcefully trying to pull her away from the scene.

"LEAFY!" He yelled. "YOU'LL GET HURT!"

"I'M METALLIC RIGHT NOW, FIREY! WE NEED TO GET EVERYONE OUT OF THERE!" Leafy's eyes glanced at the entrance, her heart sinking as debris had now blocked any way in or out.

Yet, Firey shook his head, desperately clutching her hands and holding them close to his chest. His eyes, now quivering with fear, locked onto Leafy's with a fog of concern blanketing over them. There was no way he was letting her go onto the scene.

Not alone.

Not like this.

To his surprise, she pulled him in, placing a kiss on the top of his forehead.

"Please," she whispered. "I have to help..!"

"N-No. Now there's no way I'm letting you-"

"Then we do it TOGETHER."

Leafy's hand quickly clasped over his. "WHA-"

"COME ON!"

On impulse, the two would sprint closer towards the scene, trying to find a way to free the trapped objects within. With everyone now on the scene, Needle makes a mad dash away from the hotel, as Teardrop made an attempt to follow- but Needle quickly spoke, her

voice holding them back.

"GET THEM OUT," she instructed. "I'LL GET TB AND GB! TRY TO HELP EVERYONE OUT OF THERE!"

Teardrop didn't hesitate to trust her. She went one way, and they went the other- at least, until a hand grabbed at their shoulder, pulling them back. Her eyes capture a glimpse of Ruby, who was desperately trying to keep her at bay.

Ruby had to yell over the chaos. "YOU'LL GET HURT!"

'They need our help!' Teardrop signed, flinching at the sudden crash that broke from the building.

"W-We need to wait for Golfball! S-She-"

'There's no time! We have to go now!'

"Teardrop-" Ruby's words are cut off as Teardrop yanked her hands off of hers, turning and sprinting towards the hotel.

All the while, the heat was enough to make Match freeze, her sudden rigidness causing the others to run around her, much to their frustration. Pencil was quick to turn around, grabbing her by the shoulders.

"Go home!" she urged.

"I'm not letting you do this on your own!" Match insisted, her hand immediately clasping onto Pencil's. She shook her head.

"NO, Match- you'll be safer at HOME! I need to-"

"I'm in an alliance- WE'RE in an alliance here! We have to stick TOGETHER!"

"This isn't the time, Match! I- my brother- he's IN THERE!"

"Then I'll stay out here- I'll help anyone who's hurt! Come on!" Match doesn't hesitate, her teeth clenched as she sprinted towards the blaze.

"MATCH-"

"WE'RE STICKING TOGETHER!"

Some find their courage by dashing straight towards the crumbling building, yet others were quick to hold one another back, refusing the possibility of letting them go. Such as Fries- who desperately tried to keep Puffball and Gelatin at bay.

He couldn't deny it; there were no words to describe the heat that radiated from the building. But the screams were his sign to try and help. Quickly, he tried to place Puffball down alongside him, yet Gelatin sprinted past Fries, much to his dismay.

"GELATIN!" he screamed, Puffball's voice joining in as she flung into the air. A mere second passed, before her pupils shrunk with terror, finding herself in Fries's hold once more.

He was gone.

Gelatin was gone. And now he had to help with Puffball- he couldn't leave her behind.

His eyes capture a glimpse of Ruby, who worriedly placed Book beside a tree, carefully brushing her cover from the char that stained it.

"We'll be back- okay..?" Ruby whispered, placing a kiss on Book's cheek. It only resulted in a weakened murmur, but it was enough to make the gemstone spring onto her feet, running over to help in any way that she could.

It had been ages since she ran down these streets. Yet, it felt like the eyes of the past stared down upon her, shining a spotlight to warn the residing citizens of her return.

Pin knew that she wouldn't stay for long. She ran, wiping the beads of ooze that dripped down her forehead.

She passed the abandoned clubhouse. The abandoned factories and

warehouses. But when she came across Fries's home, she found herself coming to a gradual halt.

So many memories have been made here. From that house, to that little plot of land in the backyard- she recalled the time they had come across it.

She remembered the first time she found Fries gardening; how it filled her heart with glee, to have another object to share the plethora of plant facts she had.

She remembered how grouchy he was whenever everyone was around. Fries would usually shoo them all away- except for her.

"You're such a dad."

The sound of her own memory made the wound in her heart ache. Tears blurred Pin's vision as she knelt down, her hand brushing against the soil ever so gently.

Here. It was here when Fries had told her.

My life was quiet before I got into this game show. Every day was the same- until I met all of you.

She shut her eyes.

You all were the music that made life... so much brighter than before.

...

It's all gone now. That joy- that trust. Any memory that brought her joy laid six feet under, never to be seen by any object ever again.

Now, she had to run. She was here for a reason- and that was Coiny.

Diving into the shadows, Pin would wipe the stray tears from her face, racing towards the burning hotel.

With the entirety of Yoyle City now up and running, Needle found herself frantically grabbing the spare fire extinguishers that Golfball stored away in her underground lab. Bubble had already made her way to the scientists first, rushing out with a few medical kits in her arms. Golfball's first impulse is to run towards the hotel, yet Tennis Ball quickly held her back.

"We need supplies!" he shouted. "We can't just-"

"ROCKY'S IN THERE, TB!" Her words escape in the form of a scream, her heart dropping at the unfamiliar desperation in her tone. "I HAVE TO GET HIM OUT!"

"Golfball-"

"NO! I'VE LET EVERYONE DOWN- I CAN'T LET HIM DOWN AGAIN!"

One blink, and the smaller sports ball sidestepped her partner, slipping from his path and making a run for it. She leaped over the stairs, her glasses nearly falling from her face as the sudden light made her heart sink, falling into the gaping depths of her soul.

Behind her, Tennis Ball tried to get her to return- only for her to vanish, darting into the night towards the crumbling hotel. His heart raced, trying to convince himself to run after her, yet he couldn't leave without the tools to try and end the blaze.

He finds himself running back and forth, helping Needle gather the supplies, until he noticed his cousin walking towards them, sleepiness numbing her mind from properly acknowledging them. Robot Flower trailed behind her, twitching as she had been awoken from the sleeping-mode that her girlfriend had programmed for her.

"What's going on..?" Basketball murmured, stepping into the room with a yawn. "Is everything okay..?"

"GREAT! Basketball- gather as many first aid materials that you can, and meet us at the hotel!"

Tennis Ball's frantic words spilled in the form of a puzzling word-vomit, much to Basketball's confusion. Blinking, she approached the two, puckering her lips with a nervous hum.

"The hotel...? What's going on down-"

"IT'S ON FIRE! COME ON- WE HAVE TO HELP THE OTHERS!"

A sentence that made the remaining bits of sleepiness vanish from her system. In an instant, Basketball would shoot up, sporadically rushing around and grabbing the materials that her cousin had requested. It was only until Robot Flower handed her a bag, that she came to a stop.

"Here," the robot chimed. "You're going to need this- I can carry everything we need, and-"

The sports ball finds herself speaking without a second thought. "You can't come with us."

"I need to help!" Trying to brush past her lover, Robot Flower persisted, her voice glitching from the emotions that sparked through her programming. "Please!"

"I am not losing you."

"But Basketball- Remote- TV- Roboty- they're all-"

"We'll get them out. Not you. There won't be any mechanical minds if you come with us- that fire, it could wipe all of you out, do you understand?!"

"NO. If you go- I'm going too. I will stay right by your side, even if it kills me."

"Don't say that, don't-"

"Mechanical minds stick together. WE stick together. Remember?!"

"I SAID, NO!"

"Basketball-"

"No matter what happens to me, no matter what you hear out there, you have to PROMISE ME that you'll stay here." Basketball found her voice rising with fear. The mere possibility of losing her was enough

to make her voice crack, much to her dismay, but she pushed through the emotions with a sharp inhale.

It was enough to convince Robot Flower, at least- for her efforts soon come to a close, as she steps back, her head lowering at her instructions.

With no response, the orange sports ball leans up, giving her a gentle kiss. Robot Flower didn't hesitate to return it, a small spark emanating her own 'kiss', until the sound of Tennis Ball's voice echoed through the halls.

"Basketball- grab more first aid kits, now!" he shouted, leading Needle towards the stairway.

And that was her cue. Giving her one last glance, Basketball runs full-speed for the entrance, grabbing the pack of medical supplies and hoisting them over her shoulder. A few boxes of gauze scatter behind her, yet she shakes her head, quickly running after her cousin, and heading straight towards the scene.

A fire that had grown sporadically, to the point where night melted into the light of the hotel; the stars had fallen mute, and the flames that stretched hungrily into the sky was enough to warn the world of the hell that rose from below.

The first explosion, which seems to have come from the first floor of the hotel, sparked a chain of flames that crawled through the many halls and stairways that made the mysterious building into the maze that it was.

Inside, the smoke blinds the objects that are trapped. Smoke quickly lingered into the auras of their respective rooms, confirming their worries, while others had already scrambled from their beds, the explosion snapping them into consciousness.

Confusion and alarm quickly spiraled into distress, heat rising as it began to cook everyone that frantically tried to find a way out.

Finding exits were out of the question, as the flames grew exponentially over the walls, blinding them from any view outside.

Each breath that Liy took resulted in pain ripping through her lungs. Stumbling over her feet, she ran across the halls, her eyes scanning the room numbers that reflected from the flames.

302..

303...

304...

305!

Passing by the doors on the top floor added a fresh new scream into Liy's memories. She could overhear Cake's frantic yells, a faint 'aw seriously' echoing from the room next door, but this didn't stop her from forcing the door open.

"REMOTE?!" she cried out, immediately breaking into a coughing fit. An acrid smell of burnt rubber shot through her 'nose', and one look at the room made her heart drop.

TV's screen had been shattered, flames and sparks crawling hungrily from the inner workings of the cracks. His legs spasmed, a chord connecting him to an outlet on the wall, which had now caught on fire.

Scrambled gargles and static etched from his voice box, and while Liy frantically tried to put him out with the blanket on the bed beside him, it was no use; a loud, popping crack burst from his screen, and as the flames overtook his being, his legs fell limp.

"No.." Liy whispered, backing away in fear. With the smoke beginning to get to her, she began to fear the worst, her thoughts spiraling amongst the thick fog. "No, No-"

"Liy!"

In an instant, the icy shock that had kept Liy frozen in place immediately melted away, swiftly turning around to find where she

was. Remote was trying to take in the scene, until the heat made her twitch.

Liy frowned, quickly grabbing her girlfriend's wrist. "Let's go!"

"W-Wait," Remote's voice stuttered, her hand stretching out to try and grab TV. "TV-"

"Remote, no!"

"I-I can't leave TV behind-"

"He's already gone Remote, we have to go, NOW!"

Without thinking, Liy pulled Remote out of the room as a loud crack brought the roof of the room crumbling to the floor. She can hear the sounds of TV's metallic body being crushed, yet she doesn't turn back, racing through the thick black smog.

From what she could recall, half of the group remained on the third floor. The others settled for the second; she could only imagine what the first floor must have looked like. There's no time for the pictures to form in her mind, as she dodges every piece of collapsing debris, holding Remote close to herself.

The pair run through the halls, coming across the familiar turn that would take them towards the stairway. Grasping Liy's arm, Remote surveys the halls, her eyes adjusting to the light that permeated from the flames. There weren't too many that had escaped, only a handful of dazed and panicked residents who had been awakened by the explosion, the ringing finally settling from their ears. She trailed close behind Remote, until a voice called for the two, forcing them to come to a stop.

"Liy?!"

Hearing Foldy, Liy turned towards the woman, hugging her tightly as Bell would swing in after her. Foldy would let herself sink into her friend's arms, carefully pulling away and letting herself glance at the fire.

"Did something explode?!" she asked.

"What do you think?!" Liy shook her head, rushing to lead them all to safety. "Come on- we need to get to the stairs!"

"W-We were just talking, and then, BAM! I thought this place was safe enough for us to stay together!" Bell exclaimed, hissing at the flames that stung around her.

"I don't want to think about that right now- we're getting out of here!"
"Wait- Liy, what about Stapy?!"

That's when she stopped. Liy turned sharply towards the blue object, her hand keeping its hold on Remote's. "...What do you mean."

"Stapy- h-he said he was going to get some stuff with Marker- he could be-"

"Stuff?!"

"SNACKS!"
"He's probably on the first floor then!"

"What if he-"

"COME ON!"

She couldn't afford to lose any time here. While Liy felt a little guilty over interrupting Foldy, she knew that the grudge wouldn't last too long.

They needed to get out. To safety. To the familiar nightly air of Yoyle City.

Each of them ran, ignoring their wheezing as the air around them grew thicker with smoke. Every room revealed another horrific picture. Passing by one room, she sees Balloony's head bursting from the heat, bits of his rubbery skin splattering all over Cloudy, who was trying to lead both him and Rocky out of the burning building. Needless to say, the screams of terror were enough to trigger something so foreign within Remote, that she had to hold her chest.

Was this fear?

A feeling felt by the objects... something she always struggled to understand... was... this it?

Just as they continue to run through the scene, a rumble roars beneath them, as if the Earth was preparing to swallow them whole. The four stopped, looking to see what had caused the rumble.

"What was that?!" Foldy shouted. Bell flinched at the heat, which was now beginning to cause her to melt, until she noticed the cracks that etch across the hotel floor.

"RUN!" she screamed.

Seconds later, they find their feet scrambling to get ahead of the cracks; it becomes clear to everyone on the floor, and just as the others begin to follow, a tremor snaps through the building and sends the objects to the ground.

Liy could feel the debris and cement slamming around her. From a few feet behind her, she overhears the sound of a scream. It was no one she had been familiar with, yet it was enough to make her heart drop into the sea of despair as she realized that it had come from a child.

Even as she was helped up by Remote, she couldn't hold back from looking.

More rubble had found its way onto the ground. Pipes and debris were now exposed from the ceiling, its usual coverings now scattered all around them. Some had managed to avoid being hit by the rubble, but Rocky was now trapped, as his leg had been crushed underneath a jagged chunk of cement.

Cloudy had tried to lead him to the stairwell, to no avail; he was now crushed beneath the rubble, taking the childs' flesh and bone as well. Rocky's pained screams constricted around Liy's mind, and although Foldy and Bell were preparing to try and help, she found herself backing away, instinctively grabbing Remote's hand.

"We have to go," she whispered. "We need to get out of here."

"Liy- what about Foldy?!" Remote shouted, not letting go of her

girlfriend's hand.

"I need to get you OUT OF HERE! We'll come back to help them once you're safe!"

"Once SHE'S SAFE?!" A tinge of regret stabbed through Liy's heart as she heard Foldy, who spun around to face her. "WHAT ABOUT US?!"

"We have to get Remote out of here! S-She could get hurt- the recovery centers won't bring her-"

"And what about everyone else?!" Bell interrupted Liy's words, struggling to keep herself from melting. "T-They need our help, too!"

"Guys, please- Remote is at RISK here! Everyone can be recovered, and-"

"So their lives aren't IMPORTANT TO YOU?!"

"No, I-"

"My life isn't important to you?"
There it was. Foldy's words felt like a hard slap across Liy's face, unable to stop herself from reaching for her best friend.

"That isn't what I meant!" she pleaded. "I-"

"Don't lie to her, Liy! It's EXACTLY what you meant- Foldy never mattered to you, did she?!"

"NO, BELL! She's my closest friend, I-"

"JUST SHUT UP!"

As the two bickered, another rumble quaked through the hotel. Panicked screams mixed amongst the swirling smoke, and Liy found herself tumbling to the ground. Bell wasted no time, quickly grabbing Foldy and lifting her from the ground as a part of the floor was beginning to cave in.

Feeling the crumbling beneath her, Liy found herself yelling in fear. She scrambled to try and get herself up, until Remote's arms yanked

her to the side, lifting her from the collapsing area. There were more screams, more wails and cries, but the sound of Liy's racing heart drowned the surrounding environment into a pit of silence.

Stunned, she looked at Remote, shakily placing a hand on the side of her face. The robot knew she was in shock, finding her way back from the rubble in order to help her gather her thoughts. She had to say her name once, twice, until Liy's 'ears' caught the sound of her lover's voice.

"R-Remote...?"

"Liy, it's okay- you're oka-"

Remote could only get past the first few words, until another quake struck at the building, flinging an overhead pipe straight through the robot's 'skull'.

Shoving the massive piece of the ceiling to the side, Blocky is greeted with the sight of hell on Earth.

Fire ripped through the lobby, the atmosphere melting into a bloody orange glow. Screams greeted his eardrums, the smoke slamming into his lungs, causing him to cough.

He recalled how his closest friend had left to continue the search. Whilst it did leave Blocky concerned, he knew he was missing Grassy just as much as the rest of them.

Now, he hasn't returned home. And knowing that Pen and Eraser were here, he could only imagine that Snowball was trapped here, too.

"SNOWBALL?!" he called. "SNOWBA-"

The smoke that filled his lungs felt like sandpaper dragging against his raw flesh. As he struggled to get a good breath of air, he noticed Golfball, who sprinted right through the raging fire. He tried to yell

out at her, but the bitter smoke would pour straight into his open mouth, forcing the words into the abyss of his throat as he continued to cough, covering his mouth to get a singular breath in.

Golfball couldn't give a singular damn about it.

Forcing herself to run was an effort. Not because she wasn't athletic- she's capable of getting in a mean workout every now and then- but the flames that struck and brushed against her skin left bursting wounds and boils that brought her nerves to scream. A vile stench hits her; her own burning skin, as well as the baking flesh of those she had come to know over the past few weeks, each of them burning alive whilst they desperately searched for a way out.

Sprinting, Golfball makes her way up the flight of stairs. She remembered where Rocky was staying, his voice directing her through the orange glow of the usually-dim stairwells.

Up one. Up another. Through the doors, and two lefts.

She painstakingly slams through the doors, the sudden heat wave slicing at her skin. The stairwells themselves were already bad, but the floors were drowning with a deepened red glow, and the thick smoke that trickled from the tips of the dancing flames.

She's greeted with the sight of Liy, who cradled Remote in her arms, a pipe digging into the center of her own head. Oil and sparks shot from the wound, her eyes flickering rapidly as her hands struggled to enclose around Liy's.

Golfball froze. She watched, as the lightswitch hugged her tightly, her screams rising from the cracking flames.

"REMOTE!" she wailed. "DON'T GO! PLEASE!"

Glitching.

"NO!! PLEASE, DON'T LEAVE! DON'T LEAVE ME HERE REMOTE, D-DON'T-"

A hard static broke past the robot's mouth- until the world around them fell into silence. Using the final burst of energy she had, Remote

would shakily clasp at Liy's hands, her lips forming words that the sportsball couldn't understand.

It wasn't until the usual glow of Remote's eyes darkened, that Golfball realized what she was telling Liy.

I love you.

"R-Remote...?!" Liy shook her partner's body, oil staining her arms and chest.

I love you.

"P-please- Remote, come back, COME BACK!"

I love you.

When was the last time Golfball had said those words towards anyone.

Flinching at Liy's baneful wail, she shook her head, rushing past the scene to try and get to Rocky. There wasn't any time to try and let her emotions get the best of her- she had to-

I love you.

NO! What did she just say?!

Why was she falling APART?!

She's only a few feet away from the doors, until she finds her legs coming to a stop. There was Rocky- alive- but trapped.

Injured.

And Balloony was nowhere to be-

No. She noticed the bits of rubber on his head. The blood pooling beneath the rubble, aside from his leg. It was all she needed to know.

"ROCKY!" The sound of Golfball's voice was enough to soothe Rocky's terrified heart. In an instant, he tries to wriggle free from the debris, only to cry out at a sudden crack from his leg.

The scientist was going to try and help lift the rubble, yet, at the sound of his cry, her mind blanked out in panic. She worriedly rushed to his side, doing her best to inspect the damage that had been left.

There was no way she'd be able to get him free.

At least...

No...

She couldn't fail him... she couldn't fail them again.

This wouldn't be any better- find someone, get them to-

She needed to save him.

She refused to fail.

Not anymore.

"G-Golf..Ball..?"

Rocky noticed the way Golfball's face drained from its color, horror shining from her eyes. Despite the pain he felt, he tried to get her attention, weakly nudging himself against her.

"Golfball..!"

"Rocky- I-.."

"Help.. please..."

For a second, he stared at her, confused as she was shakily grabbing a jagged piece of cement from the ground. Its sharp edges glistened from the fire, and all Rocky could do was look up, noticing her tears as they glistened down her pained face.

"C-Close your eyes," she whispered.

"Golfball..?"

"We're getting you out. I promise. I promise- just-... close your eyes..."

Nobody had ever heard her speak below a mumble. Well, anybody besides him and TB. But Rocky knew all too well that when she speaks that way, there was no means in messing around.

He trusted her, looking away as his eyes squeezed shut, right before the sports ball swung the sharpened debris straight into his injured leg.

All the while, Foldy and Bell stumble through the hall, trying to find their way back to the stairwell before Rocky's scream forces them to a halt. They try and muster up the fortitude to return to the scene, yet Liy would trudge towards them, unable to let go of her girlfriend's corpse.

Her mind was numb. The smoke combined with the heat, her grief, stray bubbles of despair and sadness that roamed in her soul; and before Liy knew it, she found herself grabbing Foldy, despite Bell's angered shouts.

Like the fire that surrounded her, she could feel anger now spiking through her veins.

She clenched Foldy's body, even as she continued to fight against her.

Perhaps it was the flames that blinded her. Her rage?

The stairs.

The stairwell.

Faint voices inched closer towards the group, signifying the frenzy of getting themselves out of here. Liy had never imagined herself hurting someone before- until she blinked, shoving Foldy down the spiraling stairs, the impact of her body against the uneven edges echoing through the burning chamber. Bell was instantly following behind her, trying to help the woman back up as best as she could.

That's when she notices Foldy's sprained ankle. And, to her horror, the sound of sprinting footsteps shook the ground and sent her flying towards the group, desperately trying to hold them back.

Foldy's screams were then buried. Liy could only glare, her fists

trembling as she watched the crowd trample over the injured object, all until the sound of silence filled the air once more.

Back in the lobby, Blocky was working to shove any debris clear from the ground, trying to make a clearing for any object that found their way down. To his surprise, Pencil also rushed to his side, frantically blinking at the smog surrounding her.

"HAVE YOU SEEN PEN?!" Her words instantly make his blood run cold. He shoots up, stepping back from the woman in disbelief.

"I-I thought he was home?!" he shouted.

"HE WASN'T."

"Oh- SHIT-"

Panic bubbles at the center of his wooden heart, until a golden cuboid found himself stumbling through the hallway, his eyes locking onto the exit that the two had built.

With his hoarse voice, he called to them. "G-Guys..?!"

"L-LOSER..?!" Blocky couldn't stop himself from shouting the celebrity's name.

Loser didn't bother to respond. Instead, he turned back towards the way he came, shouting incomprehensible words that melted within the flames.

No words were needed in order for them to direct the others towards the exit. There aren't many, but the sounds of their footsteps clash through the fire, their horrified expressions breaking through the smoke. Quickly, Pencil would guide them through the scorching heat, patting down any stray flames that got to them.

Blocky shoved any debris to the side. Every second felt like an eternity, with the heat boiling at their skin like an enlarged oven. He

sees Bottle, half of her face now cracked as she cradled something tightly to her chest, stumbling out of the hotel as she gasped for air.

That's one object saved. Better than none, he reminded himself. Better than none.

As he quickly tried to put out any growing flames, Pencil continued to rush the others out. She noticed Dora, and as she reached out to grab the woman's hand, a burst of flames shattered through the doorway, consuming her entirely.

"DORA!" Screaming, Pencil's heart froze with terror whilst she watched her.

Once the flames consumed Dora's body, screams erupted from the woman's mouth, her vocal chords frying as she ran around blindly. Her voice began to morph into pained gargles, her body collapsing onto the front desk as her body spasmed from the pain. Her body, now reduced to a charred and boiled mess, left blood oozing from the opened cracks, a death rattle hissing from the stick figure.

And this opened a new wound that Pencil never knew she had.

Clutching her chest, the taller object found herself gasping for air, sobs breaking past her quivering mouth. She tried to find the exit once more, until she noticed Spongy, who was frantically trying to get through the exit. Blocky was quick to try and shove him through the door, until the flames began to lick against Spongy's skin.

Before they knew it, he was on fire. His legs kicked in fear, the flames tailing up his body, much to Blocky's dismay. He knew this guy wasn't going to make it; as he burnt, the wooden block found himself grabbing at Spongy's sides, ripping him apart.

Memories. Oh, how they stung.

Distressed, Pencil tried to fight through the yellow flesh, tears and blood painting over her face. "I-I have to go!"

She couldn't. She couldn't do it.

"Huh?! What about PEN?!" Blocky screamed. "He's still IN HERE,

PENCIL!"

"I-..."

A memory so vivid began to play in the back of her mind, and the stench of Spongy's burning flesh would knock the energy out of the woman, her feet trailing deeper into the lobby, and away from the door. Pencil tried to find another way to get her heart to ease its panicked tempo, even as Teardrop rushed towards her, quickly leading her away from going any further- but she then feels herself being shoved aside, as the sound of shattering glass fills her eardrums.

"THE CHANDE-"

CRASH.

For a second, it brought her back to the present, quickly turning to snap at the droplet for shoving her so harshly. Instead, she sees Teardrop right by her side, her eyes locked onto the hall ahead of them.

Pencil could only catch a glimpse of the golden chandelier, which now dug into the center of the floor, blood beginning to pool from underneath. Shuddering, the familiar sound of Loser's voice made her realize who laid beneath, until Blocky yanked her back to her feet.

Blocky didn't hold back as he yelled. "GET YOURSELF TOGETHER, PENCIL!"

"I-I- L-Loser- he- M-Match-"

"She is OUTSIDE. SHE'S SAFE- WE HAVE TO-"

"HELP!"

The cry for help made both of their heads turn. Holding her breath, Pencil clutched her scarf, seconds passing by until the voice screamed once more, his echoes being carried in by the halls.

"HELP ME!"

She recognized the sound of that voice. One that mocked her with the song she had made to pass the time; one that would wail and beg for her to check his closet for the monster that lived within, back when they were younger.

To Pencil, the sudden cry from her younger brother made something snap within her, and she found herself sprinting past Blocky, calling for him frantically. "PEN?!"

"HELP!!"

Room after room, the sights around her burned into her psyche. She runs past David, who was desperately trying to lift a piece of rubble from the ground, a pool of oil oozing beneath it. There was no need for a second glance- Roboty's antenna was enough to inform her of who he tried to save.

She passed another room, flinching from the frantic banging that came from the automatic doors. With the power now fried, the automatic doors had malfunctioned, causing some to stay permanently shut, trapping those within.

The desperate cries for help made her stomach turn. Her eyes shot to the right, seeing Gaty and Taco as they both kicked and slammed against the tightly-closed doors, the smoke beginning to obscure their faces.

With a swift turn, Pencil moves down the hall, until the heat hits her much harder than before.

"PEN?! WHERE ARE YOU?!"

"OVER HERE!!"

Eraser's voice was enough to guide her towards their direction. She could hear Blocky's footsteps behind her, and the two soon found themselves stumbling upon the couple.

Growing up, Pen had gotten himself into many mishaps. Getting stuck in a pool of mud, nearly drowning by placing his inflatable armbands on his legs- even dropping the vacuum so hard that it broke a hole into their parent's door.

But seeing Pen getting caught mid-waist by the automatic doors instantly made any anger dissipate, and she rushed over, worriedly checking his face for any injuries.

"WHAT HAPPENED?! ARE YOU OKAY?!" she yelled. Pen could only cough, the ink-black smoke drowning his lungs with ash as he gave her a weakened grin.

"L-Looks like I'm in a tight situation..?" He laughed nervously. "Haha!!"

"PEN."

Despite his older sister's glare, Pen would turn to see Blocky, his eyes widening at the sight before him. He swore under his breath, quickly turning to face Eraser. The world was tuning in and out, much to Pen's alarm, because he found himself losing the words that came from their mouths.

"Eraser- w-where's Snowball?!" He could recognize Blocky's voice.

"Huh?! Snowball- wasn't he looking for Grassy WITH you?!" Eraser...

"He was, until we split the search! I didn't see him back home- I thought he was with you!"

"We haven't seen him since THIS MORNING!"

At that moment, Blocky's world nearly crumbles. He has to yell at the top of his lungs, forcibly trying to pry the doors open. Even with his emotions fueling his strength, the doors didn't budge- and Pen could only shiver.

Blinking, he'd wince as Blocky shouted over the roaring flames. "FUCK! Can't we pull him out?!"

"I-I've TRIED!" Eraser yelled, grabbing at Pen's shoulder's and giving him a hard tug. This only made the taller object yelp, and Pencil didn't hesitate to slap Eraser's hands off of him.

"STOP!" she shouted. "YOU'RE HURTING HIM!"

"HOW THE HELL CAN WE GET HIM OUT THEN!?"

"T-THERE HAS TO BE A WAY TO-"

Within seconds, another blast shoots through the building. The floor quakes beneath their feet, and in that moment, the motion detectors on the top of the door flickers, signifying its return to the system.

The doors around the four swiftly open, unveiling the desperate coughs and hacks from the accumulating smog within their rooms. Yet, Pen's door sparked, a loud whirr echoing beneath the flames as Pen's eyes began to widen.

"G-Guys-" he sputtered out. "Guys-"

"Pen-?!" Eraser grabbed his boyfriend's face, lifting his head to meet his eyes. "PEN, WHAT'S-"

"I-it's getting tiGHTER!!"

"GUYS!"

"GET ME OUT OF HERE!!"

"PEN- PEN, LOOK AT ME, LOOK-"

A scream, a crunch, and a soft thud would silence Eraser's words- at least, after the blood and ink splattered onto their faces.

The sound of his boyfriend's cry was the last thing Pen would hear, until a searing pain ripped through his body, flinging him to the ground. Time seemed to freeze- even with the taste of blood flooding at the back of his throat, he mustered up the strength to lift himself onto his elbows, clawing at the ground to move, inch by careful inch.

Words were at the tip of his tongue. Choking through the blood, he struggled in an effort to lift his head, flinching at the heat that boiled beneath him.

"G-..Guys..?" he sputtered, shakily dragging himself towards the three. "P-..Ple..ase..."

His breath drained faster than the blood from his own body.

A scream.

Eraser had to hold his mouth, his face losing its pink hue from terror.

A crunch.

Blocky's teeth clenched in horror, unable to stop the angered yell that roared with the flames.

A soft thud.

Watching her little brother drag himself towards them, his organs and bones trailing in a bloody river from his severed stomach was too much to take in for Pencil. Inside, the severed half of his legs remained, twitching sporadically from the nerves in his cut muscles.

Pen's breaths faded away quickly. Shaking, Eraser would brush his quaking fingers against his cheek, noting the concoction of ink and blood that was now painted over them. He wasn't sure if he had screamed at that moment, but before he knew it, Blocky was pulling him away, away from his boyfriend, away from the baking inferno of the halls.

"ERASER," he screamed through tears. "WE HAVE TO GO!"

"NO! FUCK- PEN! PEN!" His boyfriend's name broke past like a repeating record. His hand outstretched, clawing through the air to try and save his lover from the flames.

"HE'S GONE, ERASER!"

"LET- GO OF ME!"

"HE'S DEAD!"

While the two were struggling to get away, Pencil found herself kneeling down, shakily cradling the upper half of her brother, her hands clenching his arms. "H-Hey- Listen to me, Pen, LISTEN TO ME!"

His breaths dwindled, yet his eyes remained locked onto hers. Pencil

wasn't a fool- her brother, unfortunately, was- and she could only force herself to rock him slowly, stumbling back onto her feet.

"K-Keep your eyes on me, okay..?" she whispered.

Pen gargled from the blood that pooled at the center of his mouth. Wincing, Pencil clutched him tightly, running through the crumbling hallway. The sight of them was enough to make Eraser break free from Blocky's grip, wheezing and watching as Pen would mouth words he couldn't decipher. Perhaps it was the flames. Or the screams. He couldn't tell- no matter how hard he tried.

Instinctively, Pen's eyes find Eraser's. He could only muster up the energy to reach over, his fingers clinging onto his boyfriend's arm with the last remaining bits of energy that he had. The sound of his sister's frantic screaming and his boyfriend's shouting fell into silence, his eyes glazing over as they rolled into the back of his head.

Leaning against the wall in horror, Eraser would clutch his chest, grief and smoke drowning him amongst the flames. Help. He was begging him to help him- and he didn't. Now, his heart would shatter, pieces scattering through his body as he realized how he had failed him.

His boyfriend.

Objects dash by his line of sight. With tears mixing with the ink on his cheeks, his gaze captures Gelatin, who sprinted past him while giving every room around him a panicked glance. Screams and cries captured him like an angler's lure, soon coming across a peculiar room where a familiar lollipop lay on the ground, succumbing to the smoke around her.

One look, and he looked around, grabbing a piece of the rubble and swinging it directly into the door. He loses count of how often he hit against it; once the door shatters, thick, black smoke pours from the impact, spilling out a silence that makes his heart drop.

"LOLLIPOP!" he shouted, ripping the door open. His eyes blink sporadically to try and keep the burning smog from piercing at his retinas, as he makes the immediate move of dragging the woman out

from the room.

The air in the halls weren't any better, yet it was enough to bring Gaty and Taco back to their feet, hacking any remaining puffs of smoke from their burning lungs. Saw scrambled after them, coughing from the fumes that made her throat sting.

"Oh my FENCE- w-we need to run!" Gaty sputtered, coughing as Saw would hug her tightly. "Can you guys see anything?!"

"The smoke is blocking my view!" Saw cried out.

"Gah- Taco?! Anything?!"
...

The absence of a response made Gaty turn to see what had occurred, with Saw's gaze following after her.

Emerging from the smoke, Gelatin and Taco would drag Lollipop from the room. He waved his hands rapidly, forcing a few clouds of gray to dissipate from the movements. Taco rushed to the ground, scooping Lollipop's body into her arms.

"Lolli..?!"

Her head was beginning to melt. Giving her a shake, Taco yells her name once more.

"LOLLI?!"

No response. Lifting her head, Taco lost the sound of her girlfriend's breaths, despite hearing her wheezing in the room. Her hands hastily brush against her chest, pressing down on the spot where she'd often lay against, the rhythm of her heart always lulling her with a sense of peace.

Pressing down, she searched, desperate to find that heartbeat once more.

Nothing.

"LOLLIPOP!" Now, Taco loses the collectiveness she had, shaking her

like a ragdoll, and even slapping her to try and wake her up. "LOLLIPOP!!"

"TACO!" Saw pulled her friend to her side, letting Gelatin drag her towards them. Fear quaked at his bones, unable to stop his hands and limbs from trembling at the sight of his injured friend.

He remembered the maneuver he had to do. Pressed down against her chest, he forced himself to keep a rhythm, remembering the one lesson that Golfball had given them ages ago.

And it worked. Giving a hard cough, Lollipop surges up, clutching her chest whilst catching her own breath.

"Lollipop..?!" Gelatin whispered, quickly grabbing at her arms. Her eyes squeeze shut, until they flutter open, slowly meeting his gaze until she shook her head.

"...I knew this hotel was in poor taste," she said weakly.

"LOLLIPOP!"

The purple pop soon found herself being tackled to the ground, her friends and girlfriend hugging her tightly. She flinches, the world spinning aimlessly as she makes an effort to adjust herself.

"P-Pleased to see you all, too."

Taco was the first to help her up, her hands cradling her girlfriend's face gently. "O-Oh- Are you- are you okay?!" she questioned, her voice heavy with emotion.

"I've... been better, dear. You know that."

The smaller object laughs at her response. Despite the tears running down her face, she throws her arms around Lollipop, shivering as she hears the rapid beat of the object's heart. Both of them stay in each other's hold for a second, until Gaty is helping them up, coughing from the air around them.

"Y-You two can continue once we're OUT!" she shouted. "Get up!"

Gelatin was quick to see how Lollipop struggled to get back up. He rushes over, hoisting her back onto her feet and plopping her arm on the top of his head, using him as a sort of crutch.

"Gaty," Saw cried out, her eyes scanning the halls. "How do we get out of here?!"

"Oh- I know! I found a way in!" Gelatin responded, his memory replaying his footsteps as he trailed down the halls he ran through.

"Wh- are you sure?!"

"Trust me- I managed to get up here, didn't I?!

"He's right," Taco yelled, flinching at the cracking that snapped from the walls. "Guys- follow Gelatin!"

Every step they take becomes more of a blur. Stumbling turned into running, as the hotel was quick to alert them of its collapsing structure. They rush past a certain room, catching a glimpse of Bomby and Nickel as they try to force the window open. Firey Jr. stood in front of them, and with their effort, the glass would swing open, smoke beginning to pour from the room.

Their achievement was short lived- as the group watched Firey Jr. lose his balance, screaming in fear as he fell to his death.

They rush past Pie's room, where she was frantically looking for her lizard, her terrarium now empty. Woody stayed right by her side, trying to help her search the area as best as he could.

Would that be the last time they ever saw them?

No.

Gritting his teeth, Gelatin powered through the inferno, slamming through the doors and rushing through the flaming halls. Lollipop's mind was still in a haze, the smoke stunning her clarity as she struggled to keep her own balance. Saw and Taco were swift in keeping her up, rushing past the burning faces of friends and acquaintances.

Soon, they found themselves on the first floor. Gelatin's eyes shot back and forth, deciphering the path that he had taken when he ran through the flames, but with the fire growing worse, the smoke obscured any possible hint he could find.

With Lollipop's head melting, she struggled to keep her head up, fighting the heaviness that tugged at her eyes. It worried Taco to no end- in a blind panic, she rushed ahead of the group, trying to find any possible way out.

Seeing the flickering 'EXIT' sign was enough to make the tortilla gasp.

A way out! No time in hesitating here- she needed to help her friends and get them to safety!

Turning towards the group, her feet lead her towards the sign, shouting to lead them through the fire. "GUYS! THIS WAY!"

"WHAT?!" Gelatin looked up, quickly stumbling aside as his body was beginning to boil. "TACO, WHERE ARE YOU GOING?!"

"THERE'S AN EXIT HERE!"

An exit. Enough to serve as a greenlight, the four rush after Taco, withstanding the flames and crackles that taunted their efforts.

Seems like the explosion wasn't enough to knock the sign off of its path. Right before them stood a door, unscathed, but with the flames growing exponentially, they had no time to waste.

Turning around, a smile grew on Taco's face as she rushed back towards her girlfriend.

"Lolli- GUYS! It's right here! It's right-"

Cracking through her words, the four could only watch as the roof ahead of them had cracks skittering around its structure. It wasn't until Lollipop reached out, when it collapsed, blocking the EXIT before them, and crushing Taco in the process.

Blood and tomato pieces sprayed onto their faces. Pieces of flesh were also in the combination, to Lollipop's horror, as she would

slowly wipe her face clean- only to see the flattened eyeball of her girlfriend in the center of her bloodied hand.

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woohoo! another chapter.

originally this was all going to be one, but it went over 15k words. So I split them into two parts. I'm still writing some final scenes on the next chapter, so uh. Yeah! It'll be out sometime tonight, or tomorrow.

also I AM GOING TO THE NYC MEETUP. excited as hell. I'll be there at both times on that saturday since it's a graduation gift for myself and my partner (yippee!!)

OKAY! the fire will continue in the next chapter. see you in a bit.

-ice

All My Troubles, Burning Away

"FOLDY?! MARKER?! LIY- WHERE ARE YOU?!"

Flames sting against Stapy's body, as he rips through the doors around him, searching for his closest friends. He had only wanted to grab them all some bags of popcorn to make- next thing he knew, he awoke to the smell of smoke, and the sounds of screaming.

Hopping through the blaze, he finds himself getting confused by the directions in which the screams would lead him. Were they from the second floor?! The third?! Or was it here, on the first floor?!

Unable to find anything, Stapy leaps into the doors of the stairwell, and the scent of blood crashes through his senses. The smoke was too heavy for him to make out what was around him, so he lunged forward, trying to get himself to the next floor.

"HELLO?!" he screamed. "ANYONE?!"

He jumped once more, and the sound of bones snapping made the colors in his face drain.

Even as the flames crawled amongst the walls of the hotel, his gaze fell to the floor, following the glistening trail of blood.

When Foldy's lifeless eyes gazed straight through his, he was unable to contain himself from screaming in terror.

His best friend was dead.

And now, he had trampled over her. Draining her of any life that he could have possibly saved.

It was too much.

Too much for Eraser to handle.

Watching his boyfriend die right in front of him. The way his eyes dimmed as his final breath slipped past his mouth.

Would it ever leave him...?

Leaning down, he chokes on his tears as many panicked yells reverberated through the flames. Any energy to try and escape dissipated before his own eyes, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't find himself getting back onto his feet. The only thing that circulated in the back of his mind were the sights that surrounded him.

Pencil's grief. Pen's lifeless gaze. *Pen...*

"ERASER!" Despite Blocky's yells, Eraser didn't snap out of it, his feet stumbling as they trailed aimlessly through the halls. There was no way of telling if it was shock, or despair; he would have tried to go after him, if it weren't for the pair of hands that clasped at Blocky's shoulders.

Bubble.

Oh. The sight made him scowl.

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?!" he screamed, thrashing against her grip. "LET ME GO!"

"OI'M SORRY!" The metallic soap bubble cried out. "OI HAVE TO GET YOU OUT OF HERE!"

"WHAT?! NO- I–I HAVE TO- SNOWBALL!"

"COME ON!"

"SNOWBALL!! BUBBLE, PLEASE-"

"I'M SORRY! I-I'M SORRY!"

All the apologies that danced from her tongue burnt at the flames surrounding her. Regardless of the cursing and yelling that erupted from the wooden block, Bubble dragged him through the chaos, hectically finding her way back to the lobby. Flames licked at his body, yet her eyes were locked onto the entrance- refusing to look away.

Even with the threats he screamed, his screeches of pain, and the few punches he threw, Bubble mustered up the strength to hurl him out of the unblocked exit, his screams lowering as he flew across the pavement. She wastes no time, quickly diving into the wreck for any remaining survivors.

In the distance, she notices Pillow, as she quickly dragged an injured Marker from a separate room. Their eyes met, and in that moment, there was nothing that needed to be said- as they would search for any remaining survivors.

Outside, Book finds her eyes fluttering open, the screams reeling her back into consciousness. The light was quick to burn the fogginess out of her mind, giving her enough strength to drag herself back into balance.

It proves to be futile- as the sight of the burning hotel made her heart sink. Looking around, she immediately noticed Ruby- who anxiously tended to the wounded, with Match and Flower working by her side. Shakily, she reaches towards the group, her feet stepping forward as she wants to do everything in her power to help.

That's when another explosion sends her to the ground.

A small explosion bursts through the city, shards of glass and debris falling to the ground.

Screams rip through the air, pouring out from the open windows of the hotel. With the entrance of the hotel becoming consumed by the radiating flames, the only exit was quickly becoming blocked, and a multitude of familiar faces were seconds away from being trapped. A few had managed to scamper out, with others rushing in to help those who were trapped.

Some had sprinted out from those doors, consumed by the flames as they desperately tried to drop and put themselves out.

"Can you see anyone?!" Firey asked. Leafy thought that, with the light that illuminated from the fire through the slumbering city, she would be able to find any object in her line of sight. Instead, in between the alternating faces dashing towards and from the inferno, she's met with bodies.

Through the flames, Leafy catches a glimpse of a pink stapler clutching a bloodied body in his arms, wailing and frantically looking around to find the exit. A low rumble strikes the building and a chunk of the ceiling collapses, crushing him with a splash of red bursting from the impact.

She catches the arm that protruded from the rubble, the sight of his fingers twitching and shivering destroying her train of thought. Firey grabs her arm, shaking her back to reality. "Leafy!"

"T-The building's going to fall," she tells Firey. Another crack, and screams erupt from the walls.

"Come on- help treat those who escaped! I'll try and get the others out of there!" Firey shouts. The words go through one 'ear' and out the other, as Leafy's mind was locked on the dying hand of another object.

Instantly, Firey makes a mad dash into the blazing hotel. Leafy watched as his flames intertwined with the hellish fire around him, leaving him unscathed. She knew he had warned against it, wanting to keep her safe from the unfolding disaster.

But Leafy couldn't stand around. She had to help.

The metal leaf winced at the heat that slapped her face, quickly crawling through the crumbling entrance. Screams of strangers and friends alike become louder, filling her veins with terror while she moved a multitude of debris to unblock hallways that had caved in, and doors that were forced shut from falling chunks of cement.

No doubt about it, the smoke was the worst of it. She couldn't stop herself from coughing, forcibly holding her mouth to fight the threat of suffocation, and for a second, it offered a haven of relief. When a sudden scream catches her attention, she yanks her hand away, a thin string of melting metal connecting from her palm, to her mouth.

No, she thought. She was melting. Time wasn't on her side- and her efforts had to be quick.

The flames around her radiate with an unfathomable heat, one that she can't bear to stay in, even with her metallic body. Leafy leaps over a collapsed chunk of ceiling, continuing to follow the scream. She comes across a small nail, who is trapped underneath a combination of fallen debris, and the flames are snaking towards her.

"HELP!" The nail- Naily- cried out. "HELP ME!"

"HOLD ON!" Leafy shouted, scrambling over. She grabs at the chunks of cement, before her hands fly back with a yelp of pain.

This heat- it was too much. Yet those flames were growing by the second- she wasted no time, bracing herself and slamming her hands on the chunks of debris, ripping them off of her body.

Naily's screech pierced through her. "I-IT'S GETTING HOTTER!"

"I KNOW! A-ALMOST-"

Frantically tugging, Leafy lets out a scream as she forcibly shoves the debris, inching it off of her body. She feels her metallic stem-tail catch on fire, gritting her teeth until she looked down. She sees Naily's visibly injured body- yet she refuses to drop the debris, even as her throat burned from the flames.

"GO!" she screamed. "GO NOW!"

"AH-"

Naily kicked her legs, freeing herself from the rubble as the flames quickly snake at the now-empty space. This is enough to make Leafy drop the rubble, quickly patting herself down from the fire that began to climb up her body.

The more she pats and swipes, the more her body begins to melt. She had lost track of Firey, now trapped in the center of a towering inferno on her own.

Coughing soon breaks from her, and she turns towards Naily, who is stumbling down the wrong direction of the hallway. Leafy rushed after her, yanking her up and leading her towards the entrance.

Screams, both familiar and unfamiliar, overpower her mind. Leafy has to collect herself to try and shout over them. "THIS WAY! THERE'S AN OPENING THIS WAY! FOLLOW US!"

It isn't long until the frantic pattering of footsteps can be heard. Before she can even realize it, Leafy finds herself stumbling into one of the shabbier rooms, collapsing onto her knees as she takes in a gasp of smoke. A searing pain roars through her metallic chest, and the vomiting begins. There goes her dinner, and whatever remained in her stomach; as the retching continued, she finds herself heaving blood and melted iron.

Running past her, Woody found himself getting lost amongst the smoke. There was no way of telling where he was, as the crumbling walls destroyed any familiar sights that could have guided his way. With a broken whine, he made a dash towards a particular hallway, worriedly patting himself down in case any flames got onto him.

That's when he hears the cry.

"HELLO?! ANYONE?!"

A voice so familiar, it makes him turn, squinting to try and make out any movements through the shadows. It took him a second, until the voice spoke again, directing his attention towards the end of the hall.

"HELP US! WE'RE OVER HERE!"

...

Down... that hallway...?

The smoke had become too much for him- his chest was searing from the heat of the ashes that filled his lungs. He knew he shouldn't- he knew that it was best to get to safety.

But Golfball's demanding tone was enough to make him think otherwise.

Rushing towards her, he realized that the flames illuminated the fog around them, soon spotting the sports ball as she was trying to get past a pile of debris. On the ground laid Rocky, his face gaunt with pain and fear, as his missing leg now formed a pool of blood that grew beneath him.

She'd had to cut it off.

There was no way she'd leave him behind.

Turning, the sports ball finds herself wheezing in relief as she sees Woody.

"WOODY! Oh, thank putts- help me out, here!"
"Wah..?"
"Help me move the debris!"
Oh.

Nodding, he would try to force the chunks of the roof out from the door's side. It takes an effort, and without any hesitation, the balsa slice lifts Rocky into his arms, leading them down the familiar stairway.

They were finding their way towards the lobby, until a crack broke through the air, and the sound of falling debris made Woody sprint, shielding Rocky from anything that could have potentially harmed him.

For a moment, he thinks he's safe- the shaking coming to a stop, as the smoke and dust settles around him. But when he realizes that Golfball is missing, his heart immediately races.

There was no sign of her.

Where did she go?!

Did she get-.. Oh *no*..

No..-

"WOODY!"

There! Beneath the pile!

Swiftly, Woody tries to get himself to pull the scientist from the rubble, but instead, he is met with an angered yell.

"GET OUT OF HERE!" she demanded.

"WAH WAH?!"

"YOU HEARD ME! GET OUT OF HERE- GET ROCKY OUT AND GET SOME HELP HERE, FOR PUTTS' SAKE!"

He shook his head. No. No, he couldn't-

"GO!"

Outside, Tennis Ball sprints around in blind confusion, trying to find Golfball's whereabouts. There was no way she could have gone inside- no matter what the thoughts would tell him, he knew that she had to be somewhere out here, somewhere safe, somewhere where the flames wouldn't sting at her body.

Anyone who had been lucky to escape ignored him, coughing and hacking as their lungs washed with the sweet relief of fresh air. Cake only managed to take a few steps away from the burning entrance, finding himself kneeling as his emotions would crash like waves against his soul.

Match's voice echoed in the sea of agony around them, as she noticed Pencil, who was shakily making her way through the burning lobby, growing closer towards the doors. She cradled the upper half of her younger brother, not caring that his organs were plopping onto the ground behind her.

No.

She had to help him.

She promised she'd get him out.

Match and Flower stumbled onto their feet, rushing to try and guide her through the roaring fires of the lobby. Tennis Ball would try and object, rushing after them, before Teardrop would appear behind Pencil, grabbing her by the arm and dashing towards the two.

Chaos. It was all chaos. He could feel Needle sprinting towards the entrance, brushing past him without a care, even as the words tried to escape his throat.

For a second, he sees Naily dashing out of the hotel, gathering the fortitude to make his way in, until a hiss rings through the atmosphere.

One of the pipes hiss from the building, blasting a gush of fire that parboiled the objects in its vicinity. It's enough to make the poor guy stumble, flinching at the light which blinded his eyesight, until Naily's screams were enough to make him look.

Although she had made it out unscathed, her body had stabbed through Clock's core, right at the center where his clock hands met. Whatever life that was left in his eyes drained away, his legs giving in before collapsing into the pool of his own blood.

Some found themselves flying back, while others, who had been caught in the blast, were left bloodied and burnt, their organs steaming in the cold air. The scent of scrambled eggs slapped across the scientist's face, his eyes finding their way towards Eggy, who now laid on the ground, her body shattered with her internal organs boiling from the heat.

Tennis Ball knew she was dead from the moment he saw her- at least, until her pupils would slowly glide to meet his own, nausea punching through his stomach. Around him, a few lay dead, their gaze caught amongst the stars; others are left screaming in agony, such as Donut, who cradled Barf Bag's steaming remains in his burnt arms, the grief and pain knocking him off of his feet.

The tiny sense of order that Tennis Ball had carried to the scene dissipates amongst the smoke.

He sees Pie, who shakily lifted herself from the ground, the side of her head having shattered open from the explosion, revealing the layers of flesh that her brain contained. Fragments of her skull and brain laid around her, her singular eye dragging back and forth to see her own missing pieces.

The smell of blueberries and iron nauseate him, his blood running cold as he watches her frail attempts at gathering the pieces of her skull. Pie's outstretched hand trembled as she reached for a piece of her brain, coated with both blood and blue. Her head soon turned towards him, and she reached over, violent shivers coursing through her.

"P-Pie.." was all Tennis Ball could muster out, stepping towards her to try and-

One step, and a squish echoed through the air. He glanced down, paralyzed by the sensation as he slowly lifted his foot to reveal what he had just stepped on.

Whatever remained of Pie's eyeball had now bursted, its inner juices and veins now spitting over the concrete.

Her shivering hand fell pathetically as she captured it. And before he could scream, he overheard the sound of Basketball's voice, forcing him to stumble away from the injured pastry.

"TENNIS BALL?!" she shouted, helping him away from the scene. "TB!"

"I-I stepped- her eye- I-" Stuttering, Tennis Ball couldn't get a cohesive

sentence to form. This frustrated his cousin, as she gave him a hard slap, forcibly yanking him back to reality.

"What are you trying to do?! Where's Golfball?!"

"WAH WAH!!"

The two scientists turn to notice Woody, who scrambled after them with a burnt and injured Rocky. Wheezing at the air that relieved his lungs, Woody would try to explain what had taken place back there, yet it only made Tennis Ball panic, stumbling past him with a frantic yell.

"GOLFBALL?!"

"Oh my court- listen to me, TB!" The force in her voice made a bolt of fear strike at his psyche. "We have to get as many people out as possible. Do you think you could help with that?!"

"I have to find Golfball, I-"

"Then GO! I'll take care of Rocky- just get her OUT!"

Before she could finish her sentence, a familiar lightswitch burst in between the two, shoving them aside. The smell of raw flesh and oil stung at Basketball's eyes, and as she tried to speak, Liy shot an angered glare towards the woman.

"MOVE!" she screamed through tears. Behind her, Bell would emerge from the flames, her bronze now partially melted as a weakened gargle was all she could muster as a cry for help. Lightning strayed by her side, holding her melted face in place to the best of his abilities. Now that survivors were emerging onto the scene, the orange sportball couldn't stop herself from looking around to see who had escaped.

None of the mechanical minds came into view. Her heart sank, and without a word, she forces herself to rush towards Bell, frantically trying to patch her up.

She had to help. Everything was chaos- and she was the only one who could help.

It was down to her.

Down to *her*.

Basketball failed to notice the way her breaths quickened, terror poisoning her veins as she found it difficult to patch up the wounded Bell. She had to fight through tears, even as Bubble would emerge from the flames, dragging a wounded Eraser across the ground with a trail of blood following her. Unlike Blocky (who desperately wailed out Snowball's name), the pink object could only sputter out half-hearted pleas, begging her to let go.

Even with this, she couldn't. Bubble marched through, unable to keep the tears from crawling down her eyes as she glanced down at him. His eyeball had been hanging from its socket, with the second explosion sending him right into a pile of debris.

"B-Bubble, please," Eraser uttered, blood seeping down his gritted teeth. "I-..Pen, he-"

"Oi needed to get you guys to safety!"

"He's still IN THERE-"

"THEN OI'LL GET HIM! OI-"

"FLOWER!"

Despite the rising cries from the injured objects, Bubble would freeze as the sights would slowly fade into her view, unable to realize the damage that had been done by that explosion.

The pavement was coated with blood and organs. She could see Cake, who's chest had been ripped open by the blast, his innards now scattered around his twitching body.

But when she hears the baneful wail of the gemstone, Bubble slowly looks down to see a severed arm, wounds seared into its flesh from the heat.

It makes her let go of Eraser. Horrified, her eyes trail towards Ruby, who now clutched an injured Flower close to her chest, desperately

trying to keep the bloom awake. Match was kneeling right next to her, trying to keep the blood from spilling- to no avail.

"FLOWER," she sniveled. "FLOWER, N-NO! NO!"

"Ru..by.."

Bubble took careful steps towards the two, her heart lurching as the plant came into view. She had thought that the explosion was enough to blast an arm off of the poor woman, when instead, all four of her limbs had been ripped from their sockets, blood squirting with every jolt that she made.

To her horror, her gaze locks itself onto Flower's exposed ribcage, her beating heart now charred with blood oozing from its sides.

It was only a glance, but Bubble knows that the wounds are far beyond what she could save. Despite Ruby's frantic words of comfort, Flower mustered enough strength to whisper.

"I-its.. Okay.."

"NO! NO, FLOWER- NO-"

"...It's beautiful.. On the other side.."

"Flower..?! Flower- what do you mean?!"

...

"FLOWER?!"

Her wails had been enough to snap Bubble back to the present. Now, she finds them falling into the damned ringing, her own heart echoing with every aching beat it made.

Sounds faded in. Wails died down. Over, and over- the metallic soap bubble couldn't handle it.

Could she?

Bubble looked back at the blazing wall of fire, its flames extending

over the flickering sign of the 'LIVE' hotel. The screams that had awoken the city were beginning to dwindle, and as she noted Ruby's wails, a terrible impulse strikes at her thoughts.

She wanted to run. She wanted to escape, to take Fanny, and leave this hell behind.

And this makes her heart plunge into the icy depths of realization.

They were suffering. All over again- and right now, they needed someone to save them.

She had to be a hero.

SHE HAD TO BE A HERO.

Turning away from the wailing gemstone, Bubble lurches back into the hotel, in search of any survivors that had found themselves trapped. She runs past a room, where, inside, weakened coughs could be heard.

Leafy wasn't sure where Firey had gone. The heat was swelling- and she needed to get out before she found herself dying.

Stumbling, Leafy would clutch her melting body, shakily finding her way back towards the entrance. That last explosion had made the hotel crumble, and she was trapped in another maze from hell, the flames cooking her alive as the atmosphere boiled around her.

Any words that broke past her throat became a mere gargle. Blood and metal driveled down her chin, keeping any attempt from speaking far from her grasp, struggling to keep herself moving.

That is, until the sound of a familiar coin made her freeze.

"GUYS! THIS WAY- THE EXIT IS THIS WAY!"

Coiny...? No- was she...

"GET OUT OF HERE! GO!"

Was she hallucinating...?

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?! RUN!!"

No- it's him- he said it was this way- go, go...

With every blink, she sees a new face dash across her sight. 8-Ball, who's breaths were a combination of wheezes and sobs, rolled towards the direction that Coiny laid before them, and the lemon leaf found her legs trailing after his path. She could feel the floor beneath her crumbling, even as she made her way towards the staircase. Nickel scrambled after her, letting Bomby cling to the top of his head whilst they tried to find a way out.

She sees many come and go.

Red...

Wait- *red*...?

Something ran past that area- *wait*-

No. It's the smoke.

She had to get out of here.

She saved someone. Oh, please, let that be enough.

Please.

In her melted state, Leafy failed to notice the flame that sparked Bomby's wick.

The sight of fire shouldn't have made Pin as terrified as it did. Yet, she found herself sneaking around the area, lurking within the shadows in order to keep her presence known.

Coiny was nowhere to be seen around the entrance, so she led herself towards the back, hoping- pleading- that he was there.

"Fries- over there!"

Puffball's voice guided the thumbtack's line of sight, forcing her to peek through the surrounding bushes. It took a bit, as they had developed thorny branches from the last she had seen them, but she leaves no impression on her surroundings.

They were in the back of the hotel, after all.

She watched as the two rushed towards the back exit, forcibly yanking the debris out of the doors direction. From the grunts that echoed past Fries's throat, Pin could tell how severe the heat had become inside.

"GELATIN?!" he yelled, shoving a piece of the wall aside. "OVER HERE!!"

"F-FRIES?!"

"YES- THIS WAY!"

No. No, this wasn't who she was looking for.

She had to focus.

Scowling, Pin snuck through the bushes, sliding behind the surrounding structures of the city. She overheard the sound of Fries and Puffball yanking Gelatin free from the rubble- at least, until a new voice made her turn.

"M-My... face..."

"Hang in there, Lollipop! F-Fries, where is everyone?!"

Lollipop?

Peeking from the building, Pin glanced back towards the family, catching onto the purple lollipop who stood beside the three.

Well- tried to stand. Her head, partially melted, would droop to the side, much to Gelatin's dismay. He held her up, keeping her arm draped on the top of his head, as Puffball spoke.

"Tennis Ball is helping anyone who got hurt! He can help-"

"Why would you DO THAT, GELATIN?!"

Hearing the yell made Pin's muscles tighten. She frowned, carefully watching as the blob of jello blinked in disbelief.

"What..?"

"LOOK at you- you're both HURT! I asked you to stay outside with Puffball- I could have gotten her FOR YOU!"

"Fries, sh-she was- You wouldn't have known where she WAS!"

"Fries and I could have looked together, Gelatin!"

"Stay out of this, PUFFY!"

"DON'T CALL ME PUFFY!"

The arguing continues with the rising tension of the flames. Shaking her head, Pin would fix herself to move forward- until another roar broke from the building, causing a piece of the roof to fling towards the edge...

Right above...

No.

"Fries, come on! Let's just get to-"

"No, Gelatin! You have to understand that this is SERIOUS! What if you got-"

"I'm not HURT!"

"AND IF YOU HAD GOTTEN KILLED?!"

Flames would wave in their direction before reeling back, swaying like a flower in the wind. Pin could only watch, as the piece of debris would slowly slip from the edge, her hand flying over her mouth at the sight.

Go, she wished to scream. *Get out of the way. It's going to fall.*

It's-

The smell of burnt flesh colonizes Pin's 'nostrils' as her hand reaches out for the group. In the seconds that she feels a scream bubbling up her throat, she watches as the chunk of debris dives towards the Earth, crushing both Fries and Puffball with a sickening crunch.

Another rumble from the building drives a chunk of the roof against Coiny's head. His vision would flicker, stars bursting in his line of sight as his ears would ring from the impact.

Oh, for mint's sake- he couldn't pass out. He couldn't die here!

No longer hearing the chaos surrounding him, the coin would dash through the fire, coughing as his breaths would take in a severe amount of smoke.

He's almost there, almost to a familiar turn that would lead him back to the entrance, until he hears a scream coming from the back.

He recognized the sound of the scream. And he knew that, if Fries had found him in here, he would be furious.

Holding his mouth, Coiny coughs as he propels through the blazing hallway, the smoke forcing tears to run down his char-covered face. The glow from the fire collided with the darkness of the smoke, making it seem as if he were at the gates of heaven and hell itself.

"GELATIN?!" he shouted. Crackling flames were the only response he received, much to his frustration, and he continued to rush through the abandoned halls, forcing himself to look through each and every room. He's focused, determined to get any survivors out of the hotel, when he sees a doorway in the distance that leads to the night sky.

He wipes his eyes. Hell, he had to blink repeatedly, making sure he

was seeing what he thought was standing before him.

In its vicinity...

"P-Pin..." Her name is a mere whisper, as Coiny captures the familiar silhouette of the thumbtack. Squinting, he tries to stare through the flames, holding his breath to see if he had-

There!

SHE WAS THERE!

"PIN!" he screamed, sprinting through the burning hall. It didn't matter if his skin was beginning to boil, or if the smoke was drowning his aching lungs.

She was there.

She was back- and he had to keep her from being seen.

Outside, Pin was trying to unblock the exit, hissing at the heat of the rubble.

To her horror, she captured the sight of that familiar copper shine, trapped behind the burning rubble of the exit. His name drowns her thoughts, and she inches closer, her hand hesitantly reaching for his direction.

It seems like he notices her too. After all, he found the exit this way; catching Pin's eyes was enough to serve as a guiding path through the blazing inferno he was trapped in.

As he's pushing the rubble aside, he notices her stepping forward, risking being seen by anyone around.

"N-No- stay back!" Coiny shouts, coughing as his hand stretches out fearfully. "PLEASE!"

Pin shook her head, and for a second, her mouth opened, until a claw slapped over it.

A familiar red claw. One that Coiny hadn't seen in ages.

That catching red hue... he should have seen it sooner.

Even as the smoke continued to fill his lungs, his eyes widened in terror as he watched the clawed arm silence Pin, using another to grab her and force her back. He stayed frozen, until the sight of Evil Leafy's eyes pierced through his soul.

She stared at him. He didn't know for how long- it almost felt like an eternity, that same, enraged expression burning holes into the front of his skull.

But when her hands snaked around Pin's throat, it sent him into a panicked frenzy, desperately grabbing at the rubble and digging his way out.

"NO!" he screamed, his hands boiling from the scorching hot debris. The pain ripped through his veins, but his fear overpowered it, as the red leaf's usual stoic expression morphed into a sinister, toothy grin.

She continued to tighten her grip around Pin's throat, despite the gasps and hacks that came from the woman. Her grip tightened, until she let go, slamming a fist into her gut.

With Pin's breath now knocked out of her, Evil Leafy yanked her onto her feet, snapping her head towards Coiny, forcing her to watch his attempts to escape.

Their eyes meet once more. Pin, whose vision was now blurred with tears, struggled against the red leaf's hold, unable to stop herself from screaming out his name.

"COIN-"

A commotion from the survivors crashes through the city.

Needle powered through the terror that suffocated her, tears dripping down her cheeks as she hurriedly led Bell towards safety. Bottle knelt beside Pie, shivering and reassuring her that her lizard was safe and sound, at least, for as long as she could. With Casper scuttling onto Pie's chest, he would curl up, even as a death rattle rose from Pie's

mouth.

A sight that would haunt everyone.

Firey had escaped from the crumbling hotel, quickly helping the group as Book would shakily pull Ruby aside. Match had to wrestle Flower's body free from the gemstone's grip, and right as Firey would turn, he caught a glimpse at-

"Leafy...?"

Any use from him quickly vanished, as he found himself staring at the burning entrance. Right in the back, he could see Leafy, who struggled to keep herself together.

He knew what happened when his flames came into contact with someone. Why, he was far too used to it; burning to a crisp was something she had experienced.

Yet, he never understood the abhorred reaction she had towards lava. That ferris wheel was something he had built for the both of them, not only to enjoy, but to share and create new memories with. She had always mentioned how it was worse than burning, and he denied it, every single time.

So, seeing his girlfriend as her metallic flesh dripped and oozed onto the ground, was enough to make him regret the anger he ever held over it.

"FIREY...!"

She was melting. Her guts- spilling onto the ground. And hearing her wail made him spring away from his sister, rushing to try and get her out.

"LEAFY!!"

Just great. Disgruntled, Match would run after him, clasping a hand over his arm as he struggled against her grip.

"Firey, now's not the time for, like, your stupid daydreams!" Match snapped. "I-"

"LOOK!"

When Match manages to grab her brother, she looks up, trying to see what he had come across. She only has a few seconds to realize that Pencil was stumbling next to the injured leaf, cradling the upper half of her brother, his flesh dangling beneath his severed wound.

Now, they find themselves running. Stumbling. Trying to reach for their lovers.

"LEAFY-"

"PENCIL!"

"TENNIS BALL!"

There could only be one person in the hotel that was capable of that voice. Despite the heat, or the twisting structure of the building, Tennis Ball runs straight towards the entrance, unable to stop himself.

He knew she was dealing with a lot. He knew Golfball better than anyone else.

And now, he had to get her out of there.

He hears another cry in the form of his name. "TENNIS BALL!"

"GOLF BALL!" he yells.

He had to assure her that he was near. He was going to get her out, he wouldn't leave her behind like she had initially believed. Her memory was playing tricks on her, yet he didn't want to start another debate as to what happened.

Instead, he plans to help. To show that he's always going to be by her side.

"I'M HERE, GOLFIE! I'M ON MY WAY!"

Once he's near the entrance, the smaller sports ball catches his eye, kicking at the rubble above her. Rocky's safety was enough to ease the tension in her muscles- but seeing TB rushing towards her was enough to make the terror break through.

He was going to save her.

Despite everything she had said, and done, he was coming to get her out.

She fails to notice the wobbling smile on her face. A tear trickles down the corner of her eye, the sounds of the flames falling into a low hum.

She was so sure she wouldn't have trusted him again. Perhaps the Zelatonin made her...

No. Forget it.

I can... trust him again...

He was *here*.

He-

Bubble helped Saw out of the building, taking in a long draw of fresh air. Shivering, she would try and help them through the bloodied scene, cautiously stepping over the strayed body parts that once belonged to others she had known.

Others, who she could have saved.

How ironic. Bubble always wanted people to see herself as anything but a hero. She had to endure something indescribably painful in order to put an end to the nightmare that she found herself in.

Now, here she was. Blood and char tainting her metallic surface. Her friends were injured. Her girlfriend was hurt- home, trapped in a painfully long slumber.

All because of her.

She wasn't a hero.

It's what I wanted.

She's not a hero.

I asked for it.

I'm not a hero.

I'm not a hero.

She feels her grip loosening from Saw's arm. Her mind blocks out the frantic words of the metallic object, that is, until she turns back, watching as Saw tried to get back to Gaty- who had managed to climb over the pile of rubble that separated them.

Some words were able to make it through the ringing. Leaving someone behind. Two, or perhaps, three of them. Having to go back and save them.

No, the other would cry. They're gone, they're already gone.

But she refused, climbing over the rubble.

...

A real hero would have gone after her. Pulled her away. Taken her to safety, even.

Instead, Bubble stares, slowly backing away from the growing flames before her.

Frustrated, Basketball tried to get Saw to stay, only for her to rush out of the group. She shook her head, aiming her focus on getting Lollipop and Gelatin settled. The poor dessert was trembling, stained

with both blood, and a rainbow-like substance, and despite Lollipop's efforts, she couldn't get him to ground himself back.

What Basketball didn't see was the familiar red block, stumbling towards her with a pained grunt.

"B... Basketball..." he rasped out, making her jump.

"Blocky..?!!" With the two now settled, Basketball found herself rushing towards the red block, helping him walk towards the clearing. "Blocky- w-what were you-"

"Snowball's missing."

"No. No he's not," she bursts out before she could think twice. Helping him down, she rummaged through her supplies, only for Blocky to grab her by her 'shoulders'.

"He's gone," he uttered through his gritted teeth. "He's gone- h-he..."

"We were with him, Blocky. He's still looking, he could be-"

"He wasn't home."

"BLOCKY." Now, she's unable to stop herself from sobbing. It was strained, as she was trying to keep herself quiet and collected, only for her cries to morph into horrible choking noises.

Here she was. Three people were missing in a city they had reclaimed. The hotel was on fire, and objects she once knew were either dead or in pain. And there was nothing she could do.

"Basketball?" The slight hint of worry in Blocky's tone made Basketball flinch. She tries to respond, until she notices his line of sight shifting; glancing behind her, she finds herself turning to see what he had captured.

Her heart skips a beat. Horrified, her thoughts spiral like a whirlpool as she realizes what- or who- he was staring at.

Basketball first captured a glimpse of those pink, metallic petals. Then as she saw a burning 8-Ball fall out from the blazing window,

her metallic body struck at the scientist's vision, that familiar dent on her shoulder ringing alarm bells in her mind.

Her own heart skips a beat, just as it's done in the past, until she watches Robot Flower place him alongside the other survivors, quickly digging through the burning rubble of the collapsing hotel in search of more survivors.

Despite the anger that pulled at her heart, Basketball staggered through the crowd of boiled faces, friends who were wailing and bleeding from their injuries. All she had asked of her, was to stay in the lab, to wait for her once this had all been settled.

Now, she was on the scene. And the anger didn't last a second, fear coursing through her veins at the sight of her being painfully close to the blazing hotel.

She shouts her name above the roar, attempting to overpower the havoc around her.

"ROBOT FLOWER?!"

She's almost there, close to her girlfriend and her injured friends.

"ROBOT FLOWER!!" Her voice cracks with fear. Because, in that second, Robot Flower's eyes snap away from the flames, her head turning and coming across Basketball's gaze.

The world around her melts away at the sight of her girlfriend. Catching sight of her, her voice box begins to form her name. "BASKET-"

And that's when Bomby detonated, the flames engulfing Robot Flower, burning the few survivors alive, as the blast slammed against Basketball's body.

The screams had stopped. Whoever was near the hotel, or trapped inside, was now reduced to atoms, consumed by the raging flames that burned them to a crisp.

All that remained was the stunned silence. While a few stared at the carnage in terror, Basketball found the world around her fading

away, the flames running up her chest and leaving her sprawled on the pavement.

I will stay by your side even if it kills me.

Burning flesh. Boiling organs. Her senses fall mute, even as her girlfriend's words echo in her 'ears'.

I told you so...

Robot Flower's image is the last thing that her mind clings to, the smoke blanketing over the moon and absorbing her into the aching sea of unconsciousness.

Pin's scream was the last sound that Coiny ever heard. Once the roaring fireball burst through the hotel, its boiling flames consumed him, taking him away from her.

The blast had slammed against the two, a cry of grief breaking past the thumbtack's throat as she stumbled onto the ground. Tears now streamed down her face, her limbs trembling as the world around her fell into the pit of silence.

Pin found herself sobbing. There was no point in staying silent; creaking and crumbling overpowered the sounds that broke past her mouth, her arms wrapping around her chest, the damning sight replaying in her aching mind.

His eyes, the way they looked when the flames burst through his back.

The look when he realized she wasn't able to save him..

....It really stings... doesn't it.. Pin.

No.

Not again.

Shaking, Pin stumbled away from the red leaf, the voice haunting her as memories cut at her soul. Even as Evil Leafy's lips made no movement, her voice rang loud and clear in Pin's mind, causing her to clench her fists.

"Y-You.. You.."

'Ey. Don't get yourself confused. I'm not the one who aided in your little murdering spree.

"What do you want from me..." Pin found herself whispering, her anger dissipating as the fire brought the world to light. "W...Why are you..."

Evil Leafy inched closer, teleporting with every move she made. *She and I have been keeping a close eye on you, y'know.*

Pin's heart froze at the mention. "No.. she.."

I can hear the dreams that you have....

Stumbling back, Pin fails to avoid the red leaf's claws, as she towers over her with a sickening grin.

You still talk in your sleep.

Despite her frantic punches, Evil Leafy forced her to the ground, her claws growing tighter as they clenched at the thumbtacks throat.

And trust us... we can hear the secrets that you keep.

The secrets that every object keeps.

With Scarlet's help... oh... We'll ensure that you all can bloom with the rest of us, as our Scarlet's come to a rise, finding our place above you all...

Forever-

Those were the last words Evil Leafy could muster, as Pin would scream, driving her knee straight into the red leaf's chest. Her claws

immediately loosened, giving the thumbtack a chance to swing upwards, her hand tightening into a fist.

"Find your OWN PLACE," Pin hissed. "IN HELL!"

She drives her fist forward, and with a hard crack, her fist slams against the leaf's cheek, sending her to the ground.

Pin wastes no time. Scrambling up, she gives a final glance at the burning hotel, and the sob that she had forcibly held would break past her lips.

She couldn't save him.

And now, he'd think- oh, he was going to think she started it-...

Huffing, Pin stops herself, hesitantly stepping away as Evil Leafy's words flood into the back of her mind.

The dreams.

She said she could hear them- she thought that it was over. Ever since her recovery, she never experienced any other nightmares like before.

How could she have known.. if...

"Oh," Pin whispers. "Oh no."

Her eyes sweep across the city. As the few weakened cries swelled in volume, she stumbled back, darting towards the path that led her to the forest.

Again.

The red leaf, who was sprawled on the ground, twitched. Her head twists, her pupil following the thumbtack as she made her escape.

"It's happening again."

---

so according to my math, both chapters 16 and 17 come out to 18,547 words!

These two chapters had to be the hardest ones, since it was a very rushed scenario, and I had to try and find ways to cover ALL OF THEM, no matter whether they were dead or alive.

Speaking of: i'm attaching the death list (made for these two chapters ONLY) here! in case anyone needs a reference.

I'M ALSO GOING TO A HAUNTED HOTEL NEXT WEEKEND. Salem MA is such a witchy place, love it there.

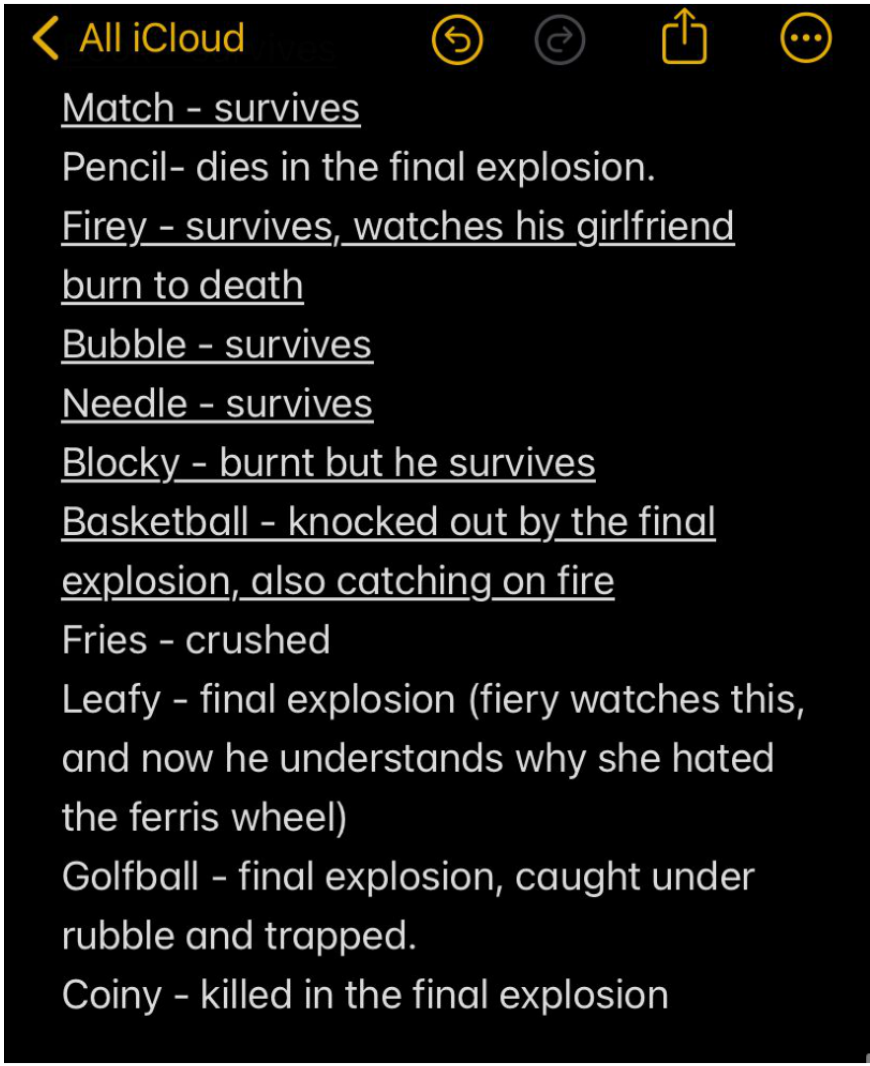
I hope you guys enjoyed!! I'll catch you in the next chapter, bye!

-ice

Bell - half-melted but survives
Liy - alive, she makes it out. Grief stricken, disturbed and angered
Foldy - trampled
Stapy - crushed
Lightning - survives
Cake - killed in the pre-final explosion, his organs are out in the open!
Loser - gets crushed by a chandelier
Remote - dies
TV - dead after the first explosion
Roboty - crushed
David - smoke inhalation knocks him out, dies from the final explosion
Dora - she runs out and she is on fire after the first explosion
Pie - caught in pre-final explosion, alive, final explosion
Bottle (she feels lonely in the house therefore she stays with them) - cracked but she makes it (pie's lizard makes it), survives
Pillow - she makes it, brings a few out and places them by the hotel; she turns to get aid but as soon as she's running the final explosion kills those she got out

Naily - she makes it out, accidentally stabs clock
Marker - one of the ones pillow brings out, he has boils from burns
Donut - managed to get barfbag out, helps the others from there- he comes out to see barfbag's dead body, cradles her as the final explosion takes him out too
Barf Bag - caught in the pre-final explosion, her innards are scattered everywhere
Firey Jr. - falls to his death after he gets a window open for bomby (got air into the room... at what cost)
Bomby - final explosion
Nickel - final explosion
8-Ball - final explosion
Spongy - caught in front of the entrance, people have to rip him apart in order to get out
Woody - gets burned, he's hurt but he gets rocky out safely (rocky stays by GB's side since she's caught under rubble and he doesn't want to leave her)
Lollipop - survives, melting but she survives

Taco - crushed by rubble inside, it crushes her by the half of her body
Gaty- dies in the final explosion
Saw - she survives
Eggy - pre-final explosion, she is awake and she smells her innards cooking, as do the others around hers
Clock - gets stabbed by naily from the explosion, he made it out in time but the pre-final explosion sends naily straight through him
Balloony - pops from the heat
Cloudy - crushed
Rocky - something crushes his ankle; he survives
Eraser - burned but he survives
Pen (visiting to get their minds off of things) - gets caught in the fancy door- gets split in half, ink sprays all over pencil and erasers face.
Teardrop - caught in the pre-final explosion, dies
Ruby - survives
Flower - pre-final explosion, her limbs get blown off.
Book - survives


All iCloud
Match - survives
Pencil- dies in the final explosion.
Firey - survives, watches his girlfriend burn to death
Bubble - survives
Needle - survives
Blocky - burnt but he survives
Basketball - knocked out by the final explosion, also catching on fire
Fries - crushed
Leafy - final explosion (fiery watches this, and now he understands why she hated the ferris wheel)
Golfball - final explosion, caught under rubble and trapped.
Coiny - killed in the final explosion

Truths and Lies

Beep...

Ding.

Beep....

Ding.

Beep...

The world was on fire.

Beep....

Everything set ablaze in a sea of red.

Ding.

Everyone....

Beep....

Robot... Flower...

The burst of flames opened the gates of darkness, and gravity yanked Basketball away from the realm of consciousness. She fell endlessly, with the panicked voices dissipating around her, until the atmosphere shifted, and she slammed against the ground.

Once Bomby detonated, stray flames had managed to find her, although she was far enough for the blast to spare her from the worst. Her burns, throbbing with pain, silence to a faint stinging.

In darkness, she laid helplessly. No noise makes its presence known, yet her eyes trail aimlessly, grasping at anything that hinted at light, or reality. Time flung off her radar. Minutes, or hours? Seconds, or days? Any sense of it had burnt to a crisp.

There was no way she was awake. Well, obviously- the buildings and objects around were no longer in plain sight. The familiar stars, in which she'd find and explain the constellations for her family, became mute, leaving behind a barren wasteland of nothing.

Nothing.

She was nothing.

Dead? No. Death was out of the question.

Although her body pleaded against it, Basketball slowly sat herself up. She didn't understand how every part of her could sting; it wasn't any comfort to find the charred boils on her chest. She took in a breath, flinching at the ash that accumulated in the back of her throat.

Her insides stung too? How much more could she take?
For an endless amount of time, Basketball stays on the ground, her gaze breaking free from her body as she took in her surroundings. When she lifted her head, the voices returned. Her loved ones.

Whispers swirl around her. Quickly, she found herself recognizing the faint tone of her cousin, turning to try and find his presence.

Instead, her blood runs cold.

There, standing right in front of her, was Robot Flower. Motionless. Silent.

All the whispers swell into roars, keeping the sports ball rooted to the ground. They scream, taunting her of the mistakes she had made, and reminding her of endless promises she had failed to keep.

Grassy called her name. He called for his mother. And she feels herself paralyzing at the sound. Yet, she looks up, finding that her lover's arm was now outstretched towards her, her fingers

desperately aiming to hold onto any fiber of her being.

"Robot-" Basketball flinched as the voices grew louder. "-Flower!"

Nothing.

"ROBOT FLOWER!" she screamed, hurling herself towards the robot. Despite the pain that seared through her muscles, she watched as the sight of her girlfriend drew closer, and closer.

And in the midst of the chaos, she grabs onto her. Pleading. Wailing.

"COME ON!" she begged. "WE HAVE TO GO!"

No response. Clenching her teeth, Basketball nudged the object to try and get her to move.

"DON'T JUST STAND THERE!"

Beep...

"DO SOMETHING!"

Ding.

"PLEASE, SAY SOMETHING!"

Beep...

"ANYTHING!!!"

Feeling the arm lower beside her, Basketball's attempts came to a halt. She watched as Robot Flower's hand lowered to the side of her face, cradling her char-stained cheek.

All the noise had stopped. Hesitant, Basketball waited for her to move. The cold surface of the robot's thumb brushed her tears aside, and when her palm kissed against the surface of her cheek, she found herself swooning, as she had always done before.

That is, until the smooth metal began to burn.

Ding.

Her eyes opened.

Beep...

She's greeted with the sight of her lover.

Ding.

Melting...

Beep...

"Robot.. Flower..?"

"B—BASKET-"

Ding.

Basketball shot up, a scream breaking past her aching throat.

Was she awake? There was no way she could tell. It could all be a dream, her mind trapping her and replaying the memories that haunted her, reminding her of the failed promises she could never keep.

She wasn't able to make out the handful of objects that surrounded her, jumping at her exclamation and quickly working to try and calm her down. Expressions of worry were coated over their faces, trying to keep the situation under control, even as the sports ball tried to force herself up from the bed.

Ding.

"No..!" The plea escaped Basketball's mouth before she could process it. "No!!"

Instinctively, her legs jerked, forcibly kicking at anything in her way. One move sent her leg flying towards a familiar red block, and before it could slam into his chest, he stepped back, flinching from the

sudden move.

Beep.. beep... beep...

Blocky put a hand on her leg and firmly lowered it to the cot, keeping his tone stern, yet gentle. "Basketball."

"I-I-.. wha.." Basketball could only stutter out confused murmurs, wheezing for air as the nightmare constricted around her mind. Sighing, Blocky carefully laid her back, adjusting the bandages that had shifted from her movements.

Ding.

"I need you to lie back," he murmured. "This medicine is finally working. We don't want these wounds getting any worse."

Beep... beep....

"Bl..Blocky..?"

"Shh."

Ding.

Although her mind continued to scream from the aftermath of the ash and smoke, Basketball was able to make out the sounds of the heart monitor. Well, more like heart monitors- a collective chorus that beeped endlessly through the air, serving as a reminder of life to anyone in their paths.

But that dinging... where was it coming from..?

Huffing, the sports ball sank into the pillows of the cot. The gauze that blanketed over her wounds felt like a million switchblades piercing through her raw skin, twisting deeper into her flesh with every breath she took. She could have focused on keeping herself calm- her heart monitor was beeping faster than the others- but the call of curiosity was strong enough to have her turn, getting a better look at where she had woken up.

What was once the main entrance of Golfball's laboratory had now

transformed into a small, makeshift hospital.

Voices, known and estranged, make their presence known. She first noticed Woody, who quietly stood beside the recovery center. Her cousin was near his side, overlooking the process and ensuring the steadiness of the machine itself.

"Tennis Ball..?"

From the way he turned his head, Basketball felt a wave of dread crash against her. That look served as a warning, the trembling returning to her body.

"TB.." her voice warbled. "Where.. where is she."

Silence. Tennis Ball would turn, his lips pressing together in order to keep the truth from her. She never knew it was possible. A scenario- a nightmare- now clawing and grasping at her soul. There wasn't any more time to prepare- for it was now here, a truth so daunting, that it made her heart sink.

Robot Flower was gone.

She had woken up alone, after all. Strange. She wasn't used to waking up without them.

Where was the grief? Basketball could barely react. Numb, she tried to stare at the unfolding scene before her, noticing Woody whilst he made an effort in the recovery sequences.

His mouth was moving, yet the overlapping noises drowned out any sound he omitted. His hands waved towards the crowd of objects, attempting to get a sense of direction in this scene of mass-recovery.

"Wah!" he called. "Wah wah?"

"Taco, you blubbering idiot." Lollipop's voice snapped Basketball's attention, her arms folding tightly over her chest. "Revive Taco."

Basketball watched, as Woody flinched from the snappy response. He forced himself through it, typing in Taco's name and pressing the glowing, green button.

Every ticking second felt like an eternity for Lollipop. Her foot tapped impatiently, quickly brushing the side of her head to keep herself from cracking due to stress. It took an incredulous amount of effort to get her head back into its perfect shape; no way would she let it melt or crack again.

Anyone who spared a passing glance could see how irritable she had become.

With her fingers digging into the sides of her arms, she watched as Taco's name flashed on the Recovery Center's screen, noises whirring around the atmosphere until a brief ding signified the concluded recovery. Voices upon voices blocked out any sound of Taco's impact, falling onto the floor followed by a brief grunt of pain.

Lollipop didn't waste another second. Immediately, she raced towards the object, helping Taco back onto her feet and brushing any dust from her soft-shelled surface. Her hands briefly passed over the newly-formed recovery burn scars, leaving Taco with a haunting reminder of the demise that had taken her life so suddenly.

It ached, just for Lollipop to look at them.

Blinking, Taco had enough time to bring herself back to consciousness, her mind emerging from its smoky haze as she coughed into the back of her hand, a bitter taste of char remained fresh on her tongue. Fresh air washed any remaining pain away, and before Taco could take a better look at her surroundings, a pair of arms wrapped around her, pulling her away from her balanced feet.

The purple pop was never good at soothing words. She never found herself to be quite the comforter when it came to times of distress. Yet, her firm grip poured a plethora of words that Taco wouldn't ever hear.

For a moment, Taco let her head rest against Lollipop's chest, the familiar rhythm of her girlfriend's heart soothing any bits of panic that remained in her soul. The hug lasted for a few seconds, until Lollipop pulled away, her hands moving onto Taco's shoulders with a hardened grip.

"Taco," Lollipop uttered, her eyes narrowing with frustration. "Never do that again."

Never do what again? Taco thought to herself, her head tilting to its side. "Uh... Are you talking about the exit..?"

"What else could I possibly be- ugh. Nevermind that now."

Those were the last few words that Lollipop could muster, relaxing the iron grip on her body. She pulled Taco in for another hug. This time, the shorter object had a chance to return the embrace, melting into her girlfriend's warmth.

It was over. And when Taco realized it, her body began to shiver.

They stay this way, both tangled in each other's arms, as the voices around them soon fall into place. Next to them, Gelatin stood silently, exhaustion fogging in his eyes as he glanced away from the two. Her ears then catch onto a familiar voice.

"S-Saw..?"

"Oh my steel- GATY!"

"Remind me to never do that again..."

Taco can't help her eyes from glancing towards the voices. Nearby, Saw worriedly helped Gaty up from the ground, pouting as she tried to rub the off-colored burns that remained on Gaty's body. Her palms scrubbed, yet they remained. And Gaty pouted at her efforts.

"Saw," she muttered. "Leave them be."

Despite her words, Saw continued to try and clean them. "No way! There's gotta be a way to get them-"

"They're scars, remember?"

"Gaty.."

Even if they were permanent, Saw couldn't help herself from cleaning them off. It wasn't until Gaty lifted herself away from her hands that

the reality had settled in, and with tears flooding her vision, Saw lunged forwards and scooped her into a steady embrace.

Knowing that it was over, Taco felt her eyes coming to a close. She let herself stay in Lollipop's hold until she pulled away, their hands carefully sliding into one another and intertwining.

Moments pass, until another pair of arms constrict around the two. And Saw's voice filled her ears.

"GUYS!" she cried out. "Oh- w-what happened?! Where did you go?! We thought you-"

"We found a different way out," Lollipop answered.

"How?! The roof fell in front of it, right on- Taco!"

"That's me," Taco said, flinching as Saw grabbed the sides of Taco's face. "Woah- what are you-"

"You were crushed! I-"

"And I'm back. We're back- it's.." When her voice trailed off, Taco couldn't help but lower her head. Was it over? She could argue that it was; the hotel's structure stayed standing, yet the memories were burnt into their minds. It wouldn't ever leave them, no matter what they tried.

But healing. It was a chance. An opportunity, even.

"What the heck, you guys!" Gaty's yell made Taco jump. "We thought you were still inside! I went back in to try and get you guys out; next thing I know, something explodes, and I end up here."

"Gaty, we would have followed you- we just-"

"No need to explain. I promise. Just- warn us next time, will you?!"

"Next time?!"

"That's not what I- okay." Drawing in a deep breath, Gaty leaned against Saw's side, shaking her head towards the two. "Let's just drop

it. We already have enough to deal with here..."

Lollipop's eyebrow raised at Gaty's tone. Compared to her girlfriend, Gaty didn't hold back from criticizing others. She knew that she'd be frustrated by Lollipop's decision to go the other way. But she knew this grudge wouldn't last very long.

They take some time to settle down when a ding makes Lollipop turn. Another recovery. And seeing who it was made her turn towards the familiar dessert that stood right nearby.

She doesn't need to squint to make out the longing emotion that radiated from Gelatin's eyes. He stared straight ahead, watching Fries drag himself up from the ground.

A familiar pink hue was sprawled next to him; it didn't take him long to scoop her into his hold, his thumb caressing Puffball's cheek ever so gently. Seconds tick by until her eyes flutter into consciousness, and when her gaze met his, Fries pulled her close, placing a kiss on the top of her head before placing her back into his carton.

Although the rubble had crushed them, a large, jagged scar ran across Fries's body. The sight makes Gelatin's heart sink like a capsizing ship.

Gelatin found himself reaching for them as he found them in his view. He remembered the argument from the hotel, but he didn't want to hold a grudge. Not anymore.

"Go to them," Lollipop said, giving the dessert a gentle pat on his back. "They were worried sick about you."

Even with the assurance, Gelatin stayed glued to Lollipop's side. "But- what about you? Are you-"

"Yes, we're going to be fine. I think we just need some time to process everything that.. happened, back there."

"Will I see you again?"

"You're good at asking stupid questions, aren't you."

The soft chuckle made Gelatin's posture ease. With a nudge, Lollipop would let him take a few steps forwards, making his way towards Fries who now caught sight of the other object. He was quick to rush towards him, anxiously checking to see if he had any scars of his own.

Yet, as he did, Gelatin would grab a hold of Fries's arms, lowering them from his face.

"Fries," he began. "We need to talk."

Ding.

Another recovery snatched Basketball's attention away from the family.

She didn't know how her cousin was still able to keep order. Basketball had no idea as to how long she had been out, knowing that his recovery took place during her ash-induced nap. With another recovery now completed, she watched Firey as he pulled Leafy from the ground, her eyes far beyond the realm they were present in.

The voices surrounding her fall into a hush, although they continue to chatter amongst themselves. It's enough to help the sportsball listen as Firey tried to get Leafy back to the present.

"Leafy?" he asked softly. "Hey... w-welcome back, hah.." It was a pathetic attempt to make her smile, but he had to try something. Anything. Even when he saw the scars which were permanently fixed to her body, he had to keep himself from falling apart.

"Oh my spark- Leafy? Leafy?!"

Silence. A stunned silence, for her eyes were fixed onto the ground. His hand caressed her head, his now-metallic body keeping him from burning her.

"Look! I'm right here! It's me!"

Unfortunately, Firey's voice wasn't enough to drown the memories that plagued Leafy's mind. She still captured the sight of familiar

faces burning, the smell of boiling flesh, the screams.. Oh, the screams. Her eyes watered from it.

Now Firey was unsure of what he could do. Quickly, he thought of a way to break Leafy free from her haunted state, and that's when he remembered a secret. Not really a secret- but something she revealed when they had grown closer.

"Leafy- remember me? F-Fue... uhh.." His words slurred together at his attempt to pronounce the name. "Fue-gitoh..? Fuegitoh!!"

Spanish. Poorly pronounced, but enough to get her attention. With Leafy knowing the language, her lime-green eyes lift towards him, familiarity dawning over them. Firey failed to keep himself from smiling, clasping down at the lemon leaf's hands.

"That's right! Fuegitoh- t..the name you always call me! Look." He lifted her hands, letting her see the way in which he held them. "We're safe..."

Firey waited for her to speak. To acknowledge him, hell, perhaps even to tease him from his horrible pronunciation, yet he's met with silence. Her eyes stared back at him, and that's when he realized the gravity of her troubles.

None of this would have happened if he hadn't let her go in the first place. Not only towards the hotel, but from the hang glider, too.

And this... He looked down at her newly-gained scars. *This wouldn't have happened if you didn't burn.*

Being a flame, he would always be exposed to the after effects of his own mistakes. He had seen Leafy crumble into mere ash many times before; in fact, he was so used to it, that he couldn't understand why she had rejected the ferris wheel that he had built for the both of them.

His intentions were never meant to hurt her. But, in the end- it was exactly what he did. Having to see her melt, with her innards dripping to the ground, was enough to make him snap out of his stubborn hold of the past, realizing that it had probably been a repeat

of what she suffered in the ferris wheel.

The ferris wheel. That's why you hated the ferris wheel.

Meticulously, he lowered their hands, caressing the back of them to soothe her. "..I was an idiot, Leafy. I should have seen it sooner."

Seen? Leafy blinked, her hand squeezing his. She waited for him to mention the hotel, the explosions, the first, but he didn't. It was then when she realized this wasn't about the hotel.

"Leafy, I am so, so sorry. For everything- everything that I did, and everything I failed to do." There was an absence of any self-pity from Firey's voice. Many mistakes had been made on his end, and it turned everybody against her. She realized there that this bump in their relationship was finally being brought to light- and after everything she had endured, there was nothing that could make her crumble than the flame that stood before her.

Her lip quivered, and her fingers slowly cling onto Firey's hand, petrified of letting them go. The flame continued to apologize through the shattering pain of his breaking heart, even when Leafy threw herself into his arms.

He knew that this was something that would never leave them. But this was a chance for them to start anew- even in the midst of the chaos around them.

Another ding from a completed recovery brought the two back to reality. Turning, Firey caught the familiar coin-shaped object that plummeted to the ground, burn marks coating the back of his body.

Seems like the recovery roused him up. The others had either returned like nothing happened, or, much life Leafy, they were too stunned to realize that they were back. Coiny shot up with a sharp cry- a name forming at the tip of his tongue, before his lips clamped shut, silencing him from speaking a single word.

Concerned, Leafy found herself pulling away from the flame, approaching the coin-creature as his fingers clawed at the ground beneath him. She could tell he was attempting to ground himself

from his sudden death.

"Coiny?" Leafy called. "Are you alright?"

"I-.. I'm-" He tried to find an answer, but Coiny's mind became plagued with the image of Evil Leafy. Pin's fear-filled eyes won't let his racing heart steady itself. "..I'm fine. I just- I need to go."

Firey scoffed under his breath. "What's the rush? You just got back."

"I just- I have to go. I don't want to be here."

His hands fumbled. Coiny's legs scratched to sprint back to the rubble. But he knew that it would only worry the others. He could feel their eyes on him. He didn't need to turn to notice Fries, staring at him with a raised eyebrow.

An object soon whips into view, and Basketball finds Golfball glaring down at her. For a moment, she felt her muscles tense, preparing for the usual insults that derived from her cousin's girlfriend. She tried to convince herself that this could go differently. GB was just recovered, after all. The scar that cracked down her forehead, conjoining with the discolored burn scars, was enough to remind her of that.

Still. Basketball could see the annoyance in her eyes. She could only imagine what's coursing through her mind.

"Huh," she chuckled. "Look at us now- the brightest minds of Yoyle City. Gosh, Basketball- the way you screamed for that robot, it was enough to overpower the sound of that fire."

Golfball walked towards the makeshift table that stood beside Basketball's cot. Turning her head, Basketball winced at the pain that shot through her body, resulting in a grin from the smaller scientist as she grabbed the bottle of Zelatonin from the multitude of burn medicines and ointments.

Glaring, she unscrewed the cap, letting two of the pills clink against the table's surface. Golfball grabbed them, popping them into her mouth before her eyes trailed back to Basketball's, noting the confusion that radiated from her orange pupils.

"What? It's my creation- I've got a right over it," Golfball uttered. "My bottle was empty anyways."

"There's a bunch of them in the other room." Basketball winced at the hoarseness of her voice. Her cousin in-law scoffed at her words, quietly shutting the bottle and slamming it back.

"You know, I have the others constantly trying to check up on me, making sure I'm 'okay' and assuring that 'everything is going to go back to the way it was,' like I'm some sort of circus freak. Hah. Like I'm going to let idiots from a metal box tell me what's going to happen, and what isn't."

Basketball blinked. She watched as Golfball sighed, her head lowering from its pompous posture.

"...The only words I'll ever take is the reassurance of our own safety.. Tennis Ball's safety. Rocky's safety," she uttered, reminding herself of the words from the others. She glanced up at Basketball, her eyebrow raising in curiosity. "...What about you, you scientific-wannabe? How have your troubles been treating you?"

"..I got caught in the blast."

"Psh. Join the club, prima. At least you were a distance away from the explosion- from what I heard, Blocky was there to drag you back before you burnt to a crisp."

Blocky... the name was enough to make Basketball blink. What was the reason? The two didn't have anything in common- only sharing their time and effort with the object they had wished to care for.

Why did he do it?

Ignoring the basketball's confusion, Golfball paced around the cot, inspecting the injuries that she had sustained. She'd lift up the gauze, checking the state of her surface, and make her way back to her head.

"Hm...From what I can see- burnt chest... second-degree- at least. A slight concussion from the impact of the ground... heh." She chuckled, much to Basketball's annoyance. "You should have seen the

way the others begged me to take care of you. TB, especially- which, I understand. But the survivors... you've truly made a reputation for yourself, haven't you?"

A reputation. Basketball shook her head. "...Not really."

"Oh, come on. You've managed to save the city! Breaking out and completing the invention that I had rightfully started- all to bring us back from oblivion. The others adore you for it; seeing you as the brightest mind in all of Yoyle City."

"Is that why you hate me?"

Her words are enough to take Golfball aback. She sighed, partially in relief, the Zelatonin slowly taking its effects. "....Sort of. You're a little difficult to understand- with your status as a technician and a mechanic, and taking every object under your wing. Sometimes I wonder if it's all an act, but seeing how much you've cared for them all... it only made me despise you even more."

"Why."

"Because I know you aren't doing it for yourself. From Robot Flower, to Grassy... ugh. It was gross to see," she admitted. "By all means- you can be offended by this. And before I forget- I am truly sorry about your girlfriend back there."

Her words sent a bolt of pain through her heart. It reminded Basketball of Golfball's cruelty, but even while Basketball was a stunned, aching mess, the anger dissipated into emptiness.

"You should have been the one to finish that recovery center, Golfball."

"Me?"

Hesitant, Basketball gathered the strength to turn, speaking towards her cousin in-law. "Yes. You were the one who led everyone back then- you deserved that credit. Not me."

"Yeah, but unlike you- the others and I don't get along very well," Golfball murmured. "..Not like I care. I never needed their approval

anyways."

Although she was winded by her own injuries, Basketball found herself chuckling at her words. "They're just intimidated by your knowledge."

"Please," Golfball rolled her eyes. "They were never intimidated. Only saw me as 'weird'- until they needed something for themselves. I've only wished to be seen. To have my efforts acknowledged and, at least, appreciated. You? Hah- you never seem to worry about that kind of thing. You've got the skill of getting others to like you."

"I don-"

"You do. Don't make me argue, Basketball." Huffing, Golfball adjusted her glasses. "...I know that's usually our thing. But I believe that none of us are in the state to start another brawl around here."

Now, there was no way Basketball could try and respond to that. All of her energy had diminished, and she only found herself gazing at her cousin's lover with a pale look in her eyes. She was exhausted. Unable to defend herself from Golfball's usual attitude.

One look, and Golfball's demeanor softened. Her grumpiness was still there- but she leaned in, giving the orange sports ball a careful 'hug' before snapping away in the blink of an eye.

A move that slapped Basketball with another wave of confusion. Any sense of anger drained from her soul, and she didn't get very far into her thoughts before Tennis Ball made his way towards them.

Golfball was the first to speak. "TB?"

"It's all set," the larger scientist replied. "Everyone's recovered now."

"And the injured?"

"We're treating them."

"Hm. Perhaps we'd benefit from-"

"Actually.. I was hoping we could talk before we make any more

decisions."

His words halt Golfball's train of thought. Confused, she looked up towards him. "..What?"

"Basketball, excuse us," Tennis Ball told his cousin. Giving him a slow nod, the fuzzy scientist gently led his girlfriend towards a quiet area of the lab, noticing her unadjusted glasses. He fixed them ever so carefully, much to Golfball's annoyance.

This didn't last too long. Her furrowed eyebrows lifted, and the anger in her eyes dissipated into a calm sea of gray. They stared at one another; at least, until the smaller woman spoke.

"You.. you came back for me."

Tennis Ball's mouth lifted into a saddened smile. "I told you that I always would."

Always? Golfball found the idea too foreign to accept. She was never used to the idea of someone sticking around for her- after all, the scientist never bothered to consider anyone's wellbeing- yet, the more she looked at him, the more she realized that he meant every word he said.

Her brain wasn't too clear nowadays; memories coming and going. No way was it due to the Zelatonin; her attitude had mellowed down tremendously due to her creation. Could it be from the way she had died? There was no way she could ensure it.

She didn't know what to say. Tennis Ball did though, kneeling down to speak to her. "I want to see you happy, Golfball." Did he? Golfball let him place a kiss on her forehead, and another wave of unfamiliarity crashed against her. "And I'll move mountains if it means getting a smile back on your face again." He gave her a smile, nuzzling the top of her head.

A kiss; unknown, but familiar. Chaos ensued within Golfball's soul, trying to decipher the emotions she felt from the gesture. But as she watched him turn to face the crowd, she thinks back to how things were before the incident. Before Rocky's death. Before Firey's. Did an

opportunity for peace exist? A future where the scientist could find herself loving freely, once more?

....

If so, it was nothing but a lie. Golfball never shared any piece of those pathetic emotions. She did so once- and she knew how it ended.

Besides- Tennis Ball was nothing like her. He deserved someone better. Someone who had a legacy. An object that could have saved everyone by completing the machine itself.

As Golfball looked around, the two scientists said no word to each other, their silence flooding with comforting words of reunions left and right.

Her eyes fell upon Needle, who was hugging Teardrop, frowning at the bits of ash that remained permanently in her girlfriend's body. With shivering hands, she'd brush at the spots, defying against the odds to see if they could be cleaned away.

Once she realized they were permanent, her eyes clouded with that familiar haze of guilt- one Golfball could easily recognize.

An object stumbled past the two, and the scientist easily made out Pie's shape. The poor pastry stumbled around the cots, holding the freshly-received scar on the side of her head. A faint headache pierced through her skull, her vision blurring in and out of consciousness. She was close to walking straight into the recovery machine, until a pair of hands grasped at her shoulders, guiding her through the crowd.

"Huh..?" Disoriented, Pie tried to get a look at the object helping her. "What are you.."

"Wah-wah.."

Woody. Of course- how could she forget? Thanking him, the balsa slice made a careful effort to lead the pastry towards Bottle, who sat quietly with the side of her head bandaged up. He was not one to stand up against the survivors- Blocky especially, as he had taken

charge of the process itself- but he was adamant on helping Pie as soon as he could, as well as getting Pie back through recovery.

He was surprised when Pie's footsteps came to a halt, her body running stiff. "Wah..?"

"Casper...?"

Despite her vision settling back into clarity, Pie caught sight of the familiar reptile, which was cradled in Bottle's hands. Casper nestled comfortably at the warmth of her palms, their eyes closing whenever Bottle would give the top of their head a gentle pat.

Her beloved pet lizard. Safe, from the carnage that took Pie out. "Casper..!" she whispered.

When Pie's voice melted into the atmosphere, the lizard's head perked up, immediately turning towards the pastry. They eagerly skittered up from the comfort of Bottle's hold, their tail wagging carefully as they awaited their missing reunion with her.

Bottle lifted herself from her seat, walking over to bring the two together once again. Then, Blocky brushed by the three, patting Woody's back with a halfhearted sigh.

Now that they were finished with the burden of recovery, and first aid, and the permanent smell of smoke, Blocky turned towards a familiar duo and found himself trailing towards them.

Ever since the first day they had met, Pen, Eraser, Snowball, and Blocky found themselves to be inseparable from one another. Although none of them had won the first two seasons of BFDI, they felt as if their friendship was a reward enough (something that Blocky refused to admit, ever).

On the fateful day of their escape from the TLC, the four had promised to make the most of their freedom, aiming to get the best experiences out of their lives, all together.

How Blocky wished he could go back to that past.

Now, he stared at the empty shells of his best friends. And Snowball-

someone he had come to love- was gone.

His red pupils climb to meet Pen's, watching as the taller object grounded himself from unconsciousness. He refused to leave Eraser's side, his arms clutching onto his for dear life.

Eraser's body reminded him of home- the warmth he gave, his gentle movements, even the lulling sound of his heart- but after the fire, the taller object found himself becoming lost in these traits, practically sinking into his boyfriend's firm hold. It takes a minute, and the trembling starts, even as Blocky stepped into view.

"Guys...?" His voice caught Eraser's attention. Turning, the pink parallelogram shot him a glare. For what? Trying to get him away? Pen was too far gone at that point; anyone could have seen his effort to drag his friend to safety.

His thoughts were then stopped when Eraser cleared his throat. "What is it," he asked, his words bitter once they reached Blocky's mind.

"I just wanted to apologize- about before.."

"..It's fine, Blocky. We just need some time right now."

"And Pen..?"

"He's not doing well. Again- give us time."

Blocky thinks back to the hotel. Pen's demise by those closing doors. Pen, who was usually the brightest of the bunch- now reduced to a quivering mess, slumped in his boyfriend's arms as his eyes were fixed to the floor.

And when Snowball's image appeared in his mind., Blocky forced the thoughts into the darkness because it was beyond agonizing to think about the events that had unfolded, without his collectiveness shattering into pieces.

He watched Eraser, who pulled away from Pen, taking a better look at his lover with worry in his eyes. His hands adjusted Pen's blue cap, leaving it in the position it had always been seen in.

"Pen," Eraser whispered, his hands cupping around the side of his face. "Hey-.. you're back now.."

The soft feeling of his partner's palms soothed Pen, and for a moment, his cemented posture melted. His pupils slowly trailed down to Eraser's gaze. Then, he caught the scar that scratched all across his own body. And the arachnids of fear crawled up his back.

Eraser quickly helped him with the panic. Carefully, he led him to a table, giving him a seat. "C'mon Pen- let's get you settled.."

Once again, he is met with silence. The pink parallelogram couldn't help but chuckle underneath his breath, his arm draping around Pen's shoulders whilst he sat beside him.

"Wow.. no jokes for that, huh..?" he uttered, expecting to see that familiar, dorky smile on Pen's face. Instead, he finds the object turning towards him, a gaunt expression haunting his face.

"I.." It took Pen a handful of tries to form the sentence on the tip of his tongue. "I don't want to make a joke right now.. I'm sorry.."

Ultimately, the little ray of hope that Pen emitted in the past had extinguished. That smile of his was gone; although Eraser still clung to the possibility of its return, he couldn't help but feel his world shattering like a broken mirror. "..Pen, I'm so sorry.. I.."

"Eraser..."

Mustering any remaining bits of energy, Pen tossed his arms around Eraser, burying his face into the top of his head with a soft cry. The shorter object didn't hesitate to hold him close, brushing his back to soothe him from the pains that trickled through that damned scar.

"Shh.. you're okay now.." he whispered. "You're safe.."

And there they stayed. Embraced in one another's hold, the sound of their heartbeats falling into a harmonizing rhythm. The tremors that struck Pen's body resulted in a sob that cracked through the air every now and then, but with time, his quaking came to a stop, and his head was resting against the top of Eraser's.

Recoveries continued, and the revived fell. Recognized faces carefully stepped back into the present, and a familiar voice made Pen look up.

"Pence-Pence!"

"Match.."

"Oh- are you, like, okay?!"

"I.. Where's Pen..."

"Shh- c'mon, he's over there..."

Pencil was the next to check up on him. She reached out to him and he threw himself into her embrace, his body trembling, as if he had awoken from another one of his nightmares; something too familiar for Pencil herself, having grown used to it when they were younger.

Eraser sat beside the two, letting his boyfriend cling onto his arm. Moments pass, and no words are exchanged between the three, until Pencil pulled away, cradling her younger brother's face in order to get a better look at him. Whilst they sat silently, his eyes shimmered with horror, and she could feel her heart breaking in half.

"Pen?" she asked, her voice low.

Her brother's lip quivered.

"You're okay now- you're safe, I promise..." she cried. "I love you.."

"..Took you a bajillion years to say it, haha.."

Pencil was a terrible sister. Pen must know it, somewhere in his heart. Other siblings had each other's backs. They kept each other safe, defending them from any troubles that appeared in their path. And then there were siblings like her and Pen. One clinging to the hope that the other would show some sense of care. And the other, like Pencil, didn't budge.

"That's okay," whispered Pencil, shaken by the lack of humor from her brother. She knew what it was like to return with a scar that would never go away. "Trust me- you'll get used to it."

"I... I won't have to cover it up?" Pen asked.

"If you don't want to, no. That decision is up to you."

The heaviness in Pen's chest diminished at Pencil's words. It sent a wave of comfort that washed his worries away, and he found the corners of his mouth lifting into a weakened smile.

"Coming through!"

A bump in the side, and the siblings found themselves stumbling from their balance. Angered, Pencil snapped towards the voice, adjusting her scarf with a disgruntled scow.

"Hey! WATCH IT!"

"Sorry, Pen!"

"It's PENCIL- wait, Ice Cube?!"

Following the chaotic events from hours in the past, Pencil found herself rattled by the sight of the small object, who scuttled into the lab with a petrified aura. Behind her, Bracelety followed in her footsteps, holding onto a familiar plug tail to guide a disoriented Fanny through the crowd.

She remembered everyone in the clubhouse scrambling out when the first explosion woke them up. In her memory, she faintly recognized Ice Cube, who was held back by a petrified Bracelety.

"Hey, why are you three late to the party?" Pencil asked, her hands snapping onto her hips. The rest of the alliance found themselves gathering around, all thanks to Bubble silently leading them towards the two. Ruby clung onto a newly recovered Flower; her free hand was stretched out, gripping tightly onto Book's with zero chance of letting it go. The guidebook's thumb rested against the back of Ruby's hand, knowing that if she loosened her grip, her emotions would take over.

Book's body still ached. On top of the scars, the heat continued to scorch at her cover, resulting in a shiver that coursed through her system. Her tired eyes tossed around the room in hopes to get her

mind off of the sensation, but they were captured by the sight of Bubble, who stood silently nearby.

And she took a step away. As did Bubble.

Whilst Ice Cube caught her breath, Match brushed into Pencil's side, their hands unconsciously interlocking with one another. "We thought you were right behind us!"

"WE COULDN'T JUST LEAVE FANNY BEHIND! WE WANTED TO WAIT UNTIL SHE WOKE UP!" Bracelety didn't hesitate to respond. With the name leaving her mouth, Bubble's silence shattered, as she perked up, her sky-blue pupils searching for her lover.

"Fanny?" she whispered.

"Ugh! I HATED laying around all day!"

"FANNY!" The metallic soap bubble wasn't able to stop herself from rushing towards Fanny, freezing at the sight of the bandages that kept her head attached to her body. "H-How are you feeling? Is your neck any better?"

Fanny's everlasting scowl didn't leave her face. Yet, her voice carried a hint of emotion, despite her struggle to hold back a yawn. "I'm... feeling terrible. I hate how I was stuck doing nothing! Especially without yo-" Her lips tightened, slicing her words in half before she could finish.

It was a gesture that made clouds of blush spread across her face.

She.. really missed her?

Wow..

"We didn't want to bring her with us like that- but when we heard the explosion, we couldn't stay behind anymore. So, we bandaged her up," Ice Cube explained, giving Bubble a soft smile. "Hopefully she can stay in one piece..."

"Physically! Not mentally!"

Bubble found herself laughing at her words, throwing her arms around Fanny's body with a careful approach.

"I'm just so hoippy..." She whispered, nuzzling the top of Fanny's head. "Oi promise- oi won't let anything like that happen to you, ever again..."

"Oh- B-Bubs..."

A hushed sensation tugged at Bubble's heart. A sensation that would appear since the day she had met Fanny. They had given each other kisses many times ever since Bubble's initial recovery, yet there was a yearning at the bottom of her heart, longing for the cemented gesture of their love.

Leaning in, she caught Fanny's blades spinning a little faster. Their eyes met, and the warmth bloomed in Bubble's own chest.

"...I... I don't hate you."

Fanny wasn't the one to try and say the opposite. Never, in her entire life, did she ever utter the word 'love' towards anyone. Saying it was another story, as it was trapped in the center of her throat.

To Bubble, it sounded like Fanny had just screamed 'I love you' at the top of her lungs. It brought a smile to her face, hugging the short object as she buried her metallic face into the top of her head.

Whilst reunions happened left and right, Golfball made every attempt to avoid the sights like the plague. She had receded back into the quiet corners of the lab, silently looking through cluttered desks, until footsteps snatch her gaze away.

"Golfball?" Tennis Ball's voice filled her with ease, as he approached her. "What are you doing here?"

"Just- organizing some things. Figured it'd be best before we-.. deal with the hotel situation."

"Well.. Rocky's been asking for you," he said timidly. "He wants to see you."

"I'm not letting him near me," Golfball whispered, thinking back to the fire; the way Rocky's eyes were flooded with betrayal, at the realization of what she had done. "I can't."

Tennis Ball was taken aback. Surely, she couldn't have meant it- the both of them had been through thick and thin, finding solutions to any equation that life threw at them. "Golfie..."

"You won't ever understand how it felt to do what I did. His cries... they won't go away."

"You already refused to kill and recover him. You even made him a prosthetic leg- the moment we brought you back."

"That doesn't excuse what I did to him. He thinks I'm a monster, and-"

That's when he snapped over her words. "If you were a monster- you would've left him from the start! You did what you had to do-"

"And now he hates me for it. I-"

Before she could finish, she heard a loud thud, followed by a hollow cry. One that forced her muscles into a tightened grip. Her head whipped around towards the source, and her heart shattered at the sight of Rocky.

The little one struggled to get used to the new prosthetic leg that Golfball had made for him. When the remaining survivors were brought to the lab, his wound had to be sterilized in order to prevent him from getting any possible infection that could bring more harm- yet the pain of the process was something Rocky could not recall.

Beside him, Balloony swiftly pulls him from the ground, brushing him clean from the impact. Cloudy hovered over the two, and he spoke to Balloony, words that the sports ball couldn't quite capture. They both nod, assuaging the smaller object to the best of their abilities. But tears now welled in the little one's eyes, blinking rapidly to keep them from spilling.

It was difficult. His eyes inspected the metallic leg that was attached to his stump. No longer could he feel anything with it, his mind was foggy with a haunting question, one in which haunted him

throughout every passing moment: why?

The emotions were as clear as day, and when Rocky's eyes met hers, he would reach towards her direction. A gesture that should have filled her with ease- instead, the weight of her failures cut deep into her soul, like the fragments of broken glass.

She turned away, fighting the cries that swelled at the center of her throat. Rocky's eyes stayed on her, tears trickling down the sides of his face at her sudden movement, watching as Tennis Ball spoke quietly to her.

"Golfball," he uttered. "Maybe we should-"

"Zelatonin," she whispered.

"..What?"

"Give everybody a bottle of Zelatonin."

"Wh-.. Golfball, why are you-"

"There are things that some people have seen inside of that burning Hotel, Tennis Ball." Her voice fell into a low hush, as if she were giving him a warning. "Trust me- their nightmares aren't going to be easy to handle."

After getting my Zelatonin refill, Golfball kicks us out of the lab.

As I leave, I realize that the others are now left wandering- in search for a new home to reside in. Everyone I know drags themselves to their rooms. To rest, they say- to digest everything that just happened in the past few hours.

I feel okay. Happier than ever, if I could admit it. The sunshine kissed against my body and it gave me a glimpse of a past in which I could no

longer remember.

But everyone wasn't feeling the same way. We were all damaged. Broken. Burnt, for some.

I had to make sure I went along.

A few hours go by, and I find myself trailing up the familiar dirt path. The sunshine evaporates from the thick trees above me, and this time, I don't flinch from the darkness. There's a smile on my face while I walk, taking in the hush that muted any sounds surrounding the perimeter.

That's when my garden greets me.

Stepping in, I let myself inspect the hands that sprouted from the soil. They've grown cold, unlike the bodies in which they belonged to.

I was told that was normal.

Cautiously, I avoid stepping on the flowers around me. I step on, what I could only assume, a bug- and although I'm used to the bloodshed that resulted from my own hands, my heart sinks at the sight of the twitching insect.

Twitching.

'..Like Tree did.'

"Really...?"

'What?! I thought it was funny!~"

The air grows cold as I make my way to the blooming bundles of plants ahead. I smile, my hands brushing against the blooming petals of the purple hyacinths.

She was right. Spring really does bring out the best in everything. Even in-

"Snowball.." I greet, happily patting his shuddering back. "How are my forget-me-nots growing?"

A gargle. The usual response- followed by a torrent of blood, splattering

from his mouth. I roll my eyes and jab my fingers into his brain, shifting through the folds until I find what I had wished to see.

"Looks like they're growing steadily... just in time, too..."

'I told you that this was a great idea~'

"..I can't doubt you anymore."

'Come on... look at how beautiful our garden is looking? Look- your little section is right over there. I can help you with that plant you had mentioned to me... yes?~'

How could I forget? "I know. I'm saving it for the right time."

'That's alright, dear, I-'

Her silence. A rigidness I've adjusted to.

'I swear. If that child doesn't stop vomiting blood, I'll-'

"Rip his head off?"

'NOW we're talking!'

Looking down, my eyes narrow at the recognizable blades on the ground. Grassy spent the remaining period of his existence struggling to breathe, his blood drowning him repeatedly. On some days, he'd vomit torrents of blood that stream down the soil. On other days, he manages to say a word or two.

It seemed like today, he gathered the strength to speak.

"M-M...Ma a.." Blood gargles at the core of his throat. "H-..Ho ... ot..."

I sigh. "Please. Stop calling for your mom. Stop crying out for Basketball. Nobody can hear you out here, Grassy."

He continues to drown in his own blood. How it must feel like- I do wonder. But I glare down at him, plucking a buttercup from his bleeding eye socket. "Snowball may hear you- but, he's got a little headache right now. There's nothing he can really do about it."

'Good one!~'

We both share a chuckle, even as I find myself gazing back towards Tree.

'Oh my- looks like he's going to need his roots sawed off again~'

"I can do so next time. They're going to wonder where I am- it takes a lot of effort.."

'Ugh. Well- let's grab what we need, and get out of here. Are you going to put that block out of his misery?'

Oh. Right.

The list.

Before I can agree to her words, a particular flower catches my eye. It sprouted from the center of Tree's still beating heart, and as I approached him, his wheezing became jagged in pace.

'You see that..?' she hummed.

"What kind of plant is it.."

'Oh- I'll tell you all about it on our way back! For now, grab around one or two- I'm sure there's more in that heart of his!'

I wonder if he could hear her too. Because when she said this, his singular eye shut tightly, and his movements began.

He has to grow used to it.

I have to grow used to it.

Even as my fingers pierce through the fleshy, tender surface, I can feel regret swirling through my core, plucking the flowers out with his trembling groans etching into my mind.

Days had passed since the tragedy of the Hotel. Since the recoveries of both old and new faces alike.

Ever since the fire, the TLC-er's who once called it their home were now forced to find new homes amongst the abandoned city. A lot of time was needed to process the nightmare of that damned fire, and although some believed it to be nothing more than an accident, many became concerned with it being the opposite.

Now, here they were. Discussing that possibility, all while investigating the remains of the rubble. Golfball had figured that it'd be best to see the root cause of the event, but with the group of traumatized objects (with some now adjusting to her own medicine), she had to keep the crowd collected.

"People, people!" Golfball shouted. "Let's keep this orderly and CALM! We just need to search the hotel for any clues!"

Her demands are immediately met with opposition. Pen, who now had a bandana wrapped around his scar, lost his cool at the mere thought of returning to the scene. His shivering is noted by Eraser, and he didn't hesitate to ease his boyfriend from his worries.

"Pen, it's okay.." Eraser assured him. "We don't have to.."

"No, please.. please.."

"Pen.."

"Don't make me go back there.."

"How are we supposed to be calm after THAT?!" Bell shrieked.

"You get used to it," Golfball says

"Maybe you," Lightning snapped, his eyes snapping up-and-down as he gave her a look. "But WE never experienced something like this."

"Now you have! And trust me- turning this into a fight won't solve anything."

"It was too much to be a simple accident Golfball," Balloony stated

with crossed arms. "There had to be something behind it!"

Frustrated, Golfball's body grew rigid, her head snapping towards the taller object's gaze. "I'm telling you- that there ISN'T. Incidents like these have a logical explanation, and I will NOT be spoken down to by some air-headed FOOL."

And there it was. More fuel to the fires of tension. Her answer snapped something inside of Balloony, unable to hold himself back from his own words. "Really? Did cutting Rocky's leg off have a logical explanation, Golfball?!"

Chaos. Those in the group shouted at one another, appalled by the words that were thrown back and forth. It was all too familiar to Tennis Ball, who tiredly held Golfball back, ignoring her angered thrashing and foul language that erupted like an active volcano.

It was all a blur. Others in the area chose to search in blissful ignorance, luckily avoiding the heated confrontation that was taking place.

Unfortunately, a few found themselves trapped amongst the spitfire. Basketball could tell- as she was inside the still-standing structure of the hotel, glancing out to get a better glimpse of the arguments outside.

It was when Balloony snapped towards Bubble when things began to escalate. He demanded that she get herself together, to "be the hero that was needed of her" and with that, the entirety of Freesmart found themselves snapping back at him.

Bubble, on the other hand, had any sense of peace drained from her. She stood still, like a deer in headlights, with her gaze locked onto the palms of her hands. Fanny, Ice Cube and Bracelety all stood beside her, yet, despite their attempts at assuaging her racing thoughts, Balloony's words echo in the back of her mind.

Sighing, the orange sports ball steps away, disconnecting from the chaos outside. Most times, she tuned everyone out without any hesitancy. But being surrounded by the sights of a tragedy kept her soul in reality's grip, tightening with the crushing weight of her

failures.

Basketball stared at the ground, watching as the ash sprinkled around from her own movements. It was here, she realized, where she had last seen Robot Flower. Helping the others, making her own attempts to save anybody that she could find- even if she knew that her life was at stake.

Now, she remained as shattered fragments, scattered beneath the piles of rubble and ash that continued to burn, long after the fires were extinguished. And there was no way Basketball would leave her behind again.

She made an effort to try and find her girlfriend's remains. To gather any piece that she could, perhaps to repair her, or to give her a proper goodbye. Thoughts swirled in Basketball's head, and despite her brain telling her to feel, her emotions remained vacant.

There was nothing. She felt nothing. Perhaps she was being selfish, but no matter how hard she tried, no tear found its trail down her cheek. Anger was a lost memory, grievance buried beneath the ground. The only thing Basketball could make out from her own uncertainty was the pain that jabbed through her wounds from her movements.

Sticking to the structure, the sports ball digs through the steaming rubble. The spring sun dawned upon the community, yet the winds had fallen silent, keeping the ashes of the dead in every pile she passed. It proved to be anything but good, as she spotted the raw, bloody remains of those who had perished, its redness striking to the eye amongst the field of grey and black.

Yes, they had been recovered. Yes, they were now outside, either searching, or simply existing. But seeing the aftermath of incinerated bodies made Basketball's stomach turn.

She passed a piece of ink-coated remains. Fragments of Bomby. Metallic remains stay fresh in a pile. The scientist found herself digging through the scorching ash. Other objects had joined in, whether they were searching for their belongings, or the source of this disaster, but she didn't care. She couldn't find herself to care.

The colors of the environment had fallen mute to the grey ash. Basketball quickly adapted to it, until she noticed a familiar red cube, following her trail and searching through the spots where she had dug. He also made an effort to dig through any spots she had missed. It goes on for two, maybe three cycles, until she decided to speak.

"Blocky, what are you doing?" she asked. Her question fell upon deafened ears, and she cleared her throat. "Blocky."

"What?"

"What are you doing...?"

"Uh, what does it look like, genius?" the wooden block snapped. "I'm helping you."

Helping. That was supposed to be Basketball's job. She passed a pile of rubble where the shadow of a vaporized hand caught her gaze, and the ashes swell around her, forcing her to cough.

"You should go back," she stated. "I can do this myself."

"Basketball, I want to help."

"No. Please, just- go, and get some rest. Go with your friends. You're probably stressed enough with Snowball."

His name made Blocky flinch. Blinking, Basketball stepped aside, her eyes closing in regret. "..I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said it-"

"I don't have anyone left."

His words made her freeze. Turning, Basketball noticed Blocky's darkened demeanor, his hands hesitantly clawing through the ash below. "..What?"

"You said it yourself. Snowball's missing. Grassy's missing, and my friends aren't really prepared to deal with me again." He tossed a jagged, bloodied piece of rubble to the side. "I'm helping where I can, I guess."

"Blocky.."

"..Did you know that Grassy had stopped by my house, the day he went missing?"

The mention of his name made Basketball's veins fill with static. She stood, frozen as Blocky continued to talk, his words echoing through the hollow chamber around them.

"That day- when you let him play out in the rain, Grassy stopped by and asked me if he could stay with us. He told me he didn't want to play by himself- but... Snowball and I were asked to help Eraser out with some stuff at their place."

"..No." Shaking her head, Basketball took a step away from the object. "I don't believe you."

"You'd better. Because it's true."

"H-How-"

"Basketball. I made a promise with you- a promise that I'd protect that kid, no matter what. You were there when Grassy and I first met; and that day, he asked me for something as simple as letting him stay." Blocky's throat tightened with tears, as his voice began to crack. "...If I had only said yes, maybe.. he..."

At this point, a hurricane of sadness ripped through Blocky's soul. His teeth grit together as he gave the pile of rubble a hard punch, tears pouring down from the corner of his eyes. Grunting turned to yelling, and the more he hit, the more his emotions would take over, processing the reality that had now etched permanently in their lives.

And Basketball could only watch. She was pale, as if the rest of her spirit had been sucked out of her hollowed, injured body. Blocky's breakdown didn't make her flinch, but when he flung a piece of rubble, pink and yellow shimmered at her eyes. Its clanging impact forced him into silence, ringing endlessly through Basketball's skull.

Step by step, she approached the piece of rubble. It was then when she met the lifeless screen of Robot Flower, covered in ash and char. The silence she emitted told Blocky everything, for his rampage had come to a stop, approaching the sports ball with tear-stained eyes.

"...We have nothing left to go for."

"..I.."

"..So let's.. just move forward for each other. Please."

Cloudy flew through a curtain of ash and hovered over Balloony. While he searched through the upper levels of the hotel for any clues, the balloon remained in the clearing, continuing to help Rocky get used to his new leg.

Noticing his return, Balloony mustered up a smile, his cheeks flustering at the sight of the other. Cloudy returned the gesture, catching a glimpse of Rocky as he took wobbling steps on the pavement.

"He'z getting better," Cloudy acknowledged.

"Yeah. He's still tripping here and there, but it's a lot better compared to the first time he tried." Balloony sighed. "..I can only hope the same for us, too."

Confused, the cloud's eyebrow raised. "What do you mean?"

"Ever since we escaped the TLC, things just... haven't felt the same, for any of us. I know we'd constantly ask for our freedom, but now, this 'freedom' feels..."

"Heavy?"

"Moreso dark. It.. feels worse, especially after the fire."

"Hmm." Cloudy hummed in thought. "Perhapz we juzt need to-"

"Balloony...?" Rocky's voice made the two turn. Surprised, Balloony welcomed him with open arms.

"Little one! Are you done practicing?"

He nodded. Gently, they pull him over to take a seat, and they immediately catch the growing frown on his face.

"Hey, what's the matter Rocky?" Balloony asked.

"I miss Grassy..."

Any response that the two could have said fell silent. Balloony and Cloudy exchanged worried glances, unsure of the comforting words that they could offer towards him.

Unfortunately, their silence served as a message to Rocky, forcing him to look up with tear-filled eyes. "I never got to say bye... is.. is he mad at me? Did I do something wrong?"

"No! Not at all!" Wrapping an arm around him, Balloony assuaged his anxious thoughts. "It's just- he's going to be away for a little while, due to an emergency that came up.. I promise you, he'll be back before you know it."

"Hmm.."

"Hey," Cloudy lowered to his level. "Look on the bright zide- you're zpending the night with Golfball and Tenniz Ball, just like you had asked for! Isn't that exciting?"

It takes an effort to lift a smile on Rocky's face. Even if he gave them a nod, he couldn't help but think about the way Golfball turned away from him.

Even when he asked for help.

Sighing, he let himself become lost in the world around him, his eyes switching in between the objects that were near and far.

From a distance, Rocky noticed Gaty and Saw; both conversing away as Saw was kneeling on a plot of unearthed land, dropping seeds into freshly-dug craters, and planting flowers all around. She had spent a fair amount of time scavenging through the city, and she was pleasantly surprised to find a flower shop that had thriving plants in its place.

Quite eventful, if she could say so herself! The community garden was starting before the seeds hit the ground!

Giggling, Saw planted a bundle of nearly-grown chrysanthemums within an open crater. Gaty watched with interest, quietly asking Saw about the plants. Whatever answer she gave resulted in a smile of awe on the gate's face, but it quickly fell strained when she noticed Fries stepping towards their direction.

Saw was confused at first. With a swift turn, her eyes brightened with joy, noticing the bag of grotato seeds in which he had brought along. She waved him over, resulting in an eye-roll from Fries himself as he made his way around the now-blooming flowers.

He figured that starting a grotato farm in his backyard would open old wounds; the next best thing was here, even if it meant the risk of losing the grotatoes themselves.

But Saw had promised to keep them safe. It was a weary promise, but at this point Fries was desperate.

So whatever.

Many other objects would come and go from the garden. Barf Bag had plucked a freshly-grown snowdrop (despite Donut's defiance), and they found themselves being showered with many other plants that Saw was kind enough to give.

Nearby, Coiny searched aimlessly around the hotel, his eyes glancing towards the woods with every chance he got. When asked, he stated how any hints to the disaster could lie in the outskirts of the hotel's parameters, and he took it upon himself to scan for clues.

That's what everyone believed, at least. Rather than doing so, the coin anxiously searched for any signs of Pin and Evil Leafy, hoping to come across a clue of a struggle between the two. Because now, he had something. A sign. A lead that hinted at the possibility of Pin's actions not being her own.

Leafy and Firey were quick to join him in his "search for clues," ensuring that the coin-creature understood that he wasn't alone in his

efforts. It's when they reached a large fragment of the rubble, when Leafy remembered Firey's words at her own recovery.

"Say," she began. "Did you try speaking Spanish earlier?"

The flame turned his head. "Oh- I did!"

"Really?"

"Well... I tried to. It was rusty, I know- but I wanted to give it a shot. For you!"

Leafy covered her growing smile, trying to remain serious. But the thought alone made her giggle. "Well? Any other phrases you can say off the top of your head?"

"...Tah-kwee-tuhs!" (This is taquitos. Chat I actually heard someone say it this way.)

That's when her smile drops. It even grabbed Coiny's attention- as he was now staring at Firey with a look of pure horror.

"...I'm sorry- WHAT?" she asked.

Firey crossed his arms. "I said tah-kwee-tuhs! Y'know- those rolled tacos!"

Silence. All until Leafy grabbed him by the arm, dragging him away from Coiny, who was preparing to slap him silly. "And you're done."

"What?!" Firey yelped, turning his head. "What did I say?"

Even with Firey's dismayed stuttering, Leafy couldn't help but feel a sense of ease washing over her soul. It was moments like these that she missed- not any fancy, romantic gestures. But simply existing and looking for clues.

With the pressure now easing off of her, she wrapped her arms around his metallic body, her eyes coming to a close. "Ay, Fuegito," she whispered. "Eres la luz de mi vida..."

"Well, duh. I am fire, after all."

"...Tonto."

The lemon leaf held him for a few passing seconds, before letting him go, returning to the search that Coiny had endured. A lot of objects would pay them no mind, but to Fries, he couldn't help but notice Coiny's longing gaze every time he turned towards the forest.

Meanwhile, Gelatin was quietly stepping around the rubble alongside Lollipop and Taco. It had taken some time, and a lot of talking to, but Fries agreed to being more lenient with him, having to face his own fears of losing his family once more.

It was a difficult conversation to have. Yet, it left the three with a strengthening bond, giving them a better chance of recovering from the nightmares of the past.

While the three trudged through the rubble, they were surprised as Teardrop hurriedly came across their path. She was greeted with a raised eyebrow from the purple pop, yet Gelatin's face brightened at the familiar acquaintance.

"Teardrop!" he greeted. "Are you helping with the search too?"

She nodded in response. Confused, Lollipop prepared to ask the water droplet about herself, until she noticed a taller object lingering near the group, staying close enough to listen, but far enough to seem less off-putting.

It didn't matter. Lollipop already thought it was strange.

"What's with the shadow?" she asked, nodding her head towards the object's direction. Their heads turned to meet Needle, who tried to search through the rubble- only to come across a pile of ash. Teardrop's face darkened with blush, waving their hand to brush the topic aside, but Gelatin was quick to speak.

"That's her girlfriend," he smiled. "Needle."

"Would you look at that- another lesbian to join the group." Taco giggled, resulting in an eye roll from the taller object.

Pouting, Teardrop signed, 'It's my girlfriend. She's a little nervous

about trailing away from anyone.'

"..What did she sign?"

"Taco!" Gelatin crossed his arms.

"I didn't mean it in a bad way! I was just curious!"

"Well," Lollipop brushed her hands clean. "I believe I know what she was trying to say. And Teardrop- there's no need to worry. We already have Old McDonald over there- he was watching over Gelatin too."

Amidst their conversations, Book stumbled over a piece of rubble, wincing slightly as she felt her leg slam against the jagged edge. She promised Bomby that she'd find any of their belongings- if there were any. It was a promise she made, to make up for the new nightmares that now awaited them.

The alliance was also on the scene. Ruby, not wanting to leave her, searched in the areas she hadn't gone through. Flower, as well as the others, waited patiently outside, not wanting to leave them behind once more.

Whilst on her search, she came across Golfball and Tennis Ball. She overheard them discussing the possibility of a broken pipe, or a fractured stove. Yet, Bomby's name captured her attention, as she turned to get a better listen.

"No way. Bomby's explosion is powerful on its own. But the TLC was far too strong to be destroyed by an explosion of his. The metal would have been impossible to break- let alone, melt."

"Pin told us that she'd use Bomby to kill us, all while we were in the TLC..."

She uttered something more. A sentence that fueled the anguish surrounding them.

"And what kind of fool would believe that threat? If she had done so- it would have barely left a scratch on the surface."

Fool.

What kind of fool would believe it.

They gave me up. They turned *me* in, not only for their partners- but for nothing at all.

Nothing...

"Book?" Ruby's voice reached to her, even as her hands were now clinging over her head. Violent tremors shot through Book's body, with the weight of the truth clashing against the fragile walls of stability that kept her afloat. "Book, are you okay?"

"...Bubble.." Her name leaves Book's mouth through gritted teeth. "Ice Cube..."

"What? What about them?"

Rather than answering the gemstone, Book straightened herself out, stomping into the sunny atmosphere of the city. It takes a moment, but when the alliance fell into her line of sight, she could no longer hold back. She had done her best to understand the two, and where they were coming from- but this piece of knowledge was the key to her rocket of retribution.

It got her killed.

THEY got her killed.

Soon, the group noticed Book's return, getting themselves up to aid in any effort she asked for. Instead, they're met with the names of their own alliance members.

"YOU TWO," Book shouted. Her voice made Ice Cube flinch, but it wasn't enough to scare Fanny into silence. The electrical fan shot up, her eyes narrowing towards the guidebook at her sudden attitude as her tail wrapped around Bubble protectively.

"Book..?" Bubble called towards her. "Is everything-"

"You MURDERERS."

The words force the two into silence. Bubble's hands clenched into fists, her fingernails piercing through the skin of her palms. Crimson oozed down from the wounds, painting the ground with splattered roses of blood, alarming Fanny as her eyes captured the scene before her.

"Y... You both gave me up for nothing..?" Book's body screams with pain and she wished for the world to stop. "Is this true..?!"

In that instant, Bubble quickly defended herself. "She threatened to kill us, Book!" Bubble cried out. "We had to!"

The recovery center. The TLC. Bomby. Plan B. It was all a lie.

A threat that had been made against two of the weakest objects during Pin's reign of hell. It was nothing more than a lie.

Book had suspected it when she found herself being cornered by the two, back when she was attempting to complete the machine herself. At the time, she believed it had been nothing more than a brief check-in, for she had vanished without telling them. But hearing their words ripped a new wound in her saddle-stitched soul, just when she had enough damage done to her already. She thought back to their cries. Their pleas. Telling her that they never wanted to do this to her.

But there was no going back. It proved, to Book, that in any given scenario, she'd be tossed aside. Abandoned. Alone.

"You gave me up for nothing," she chuckled, a half-hearted smile stretching across her cover. "Nothing at all."

"We couldn't have known, Book! S.. She was threatening us! " Bubble stuttered out.

"And you didn't take a chance to think about whether she MEANT IT?!"

"S-She cut my ARM off because of it!"

"SHE KILLED ME BECAUSE OF YOU!"

"What are we screaming about this time?!" asked Pencil, annoyance radiating from her voice. Book found herself snapping towards her to meet her gaze, and before she could even comment, a laugh cracked through the guidebooks broken smile. "Book!"

The pressure in Book's chest swelled. Her hands were pricked with the urge to slam against any surface around her, just hard enough to shatter its surface- as well as her own bones. Not like she cared. Her anger was a banshee- screeching over the doubts and fears she was forced to carry.
"Did you know that I was the one who nearly finished the recovery center?" she croaked out, hot tears streaming down her scarred face. "I was so close to it. Too close, apparently."

Bubble slipped in front of her, to no avail. "Book, please-"

"SHUT UP, BUBBLE. What- did you really want me gone THAT badly?!"

"Book, there's, like, a thing called SENTENCES. You're a dictionary- look it up, and, like, tell us what the problem is!" Match snapped. She strode in between the two, pulling Bubble aside from the shivering woman.

"Bubble and Ice Cube got me KILLED! Hah- d-dare I say- they KILLED ME THEMSELVES!"

All four of them turn to face the two. "You both did what?!" whispered Match.

"S-She called it Plan B- she was going to use Bomby to kill everyone in the TLC.." Ice Cube's voice quivered out.

"You're joking. Like- this has to be some sort of joke, right?!"

"No," Book interjected. "They're not."

Distraught, Ruby scowled at Bubble and Ice Cube, clutching Book's hand tightly. "How could you do that to her?!" she snapped.

The sound of Ruby's voice made the poor girl's heart sink. Ice Cube didn't need to turn to see the horrified expression on her friend's face;

her head lowered in shame. Next to her, Bubble saw the familiar shade of pink. Flower's petals. Her eyes snake up to meet the taller object's gaze, flinching at the rage that emitted from her fuscia pupils.

"You both are DEAD," Flower gritted through clenched teeth. "Getting her killed for nothing- I bet you feel real proud of yourselves, huh?!"

"Flower- s-she- OMBB, we didn't KNOW!" Bubble snapped. "WE NEVER MEANT FOR THIS TO HOIPPEN!"

"Well, it did," Book said weakly, her own tears continuing to pour like a faucet. "..I could have helped you both. I swear- I-... I don't know why she made me look like the enemy."

"No, Book! No!" Ice Cube cried.

"Is that all people see me as..? An enemy? Someone who isn't worth their time of day..? Is this why I always end up alone..?"

Nauseated, the seeds of doubt bloomed in Book's soul. She had always struggled to see herself in a positive light- and seeing as to how quick her own friends were able to turn against her made the guidebook spiral, sobs wrenching in between her own pained breaths.

Ruby was quick to comfort her. Flower too, for she quietly gave her words of reassurance, until Book stepped away from the two.

"I'm always being abandoned. Left for others who are more than I am." Book's eyes met Bubble's, and a blade of grief stabbed through her chest. "..I'm destined to fail. Never to heal... never to love."

"Shut UP!" Fanny bursted out, defensively standing in front of Bubble. "Instead of blaming them- you should be blaming PIN!"

"FANNY'S RIGHT!" shouted Bracelety.

Their arguing diverted the attention of the objects surrounding them, as many turned to see what debacle was striking at the city this time. A furious Pencil slammed Bubble with the reminder of the evil she had succumbed to, but Bubble's eyes stayed locked onto Book, her pupils shrinking from the sorrow she carried.

Yet, no tears shimmered in her petrified eyes.

Book would try to shout and defend herself, unable to hold the sobs that ripped through her throat, until Golfball's wrath put an end to the chaos.

"THAT'S IT!" she screamed. "I've had it up to HERE with you Freesmarters! IF YOU'RE GOING TO SCREAM AT EACH OTHER FOR SOME STUPID REASON, THEN GET OUT OF HERE!"

Pencil defied the scientists yelling. "We're dealing with something SERIOUS HERE, Golfball!"

"AND YOU'RE MAKING IT EVERYBODY ELSE'S PROBLEM. NONE OF US CARE!"

"WELL I'M SORRY THAT WE CARE! UNLIKE SOME OBJECTS HERE!"

Her words sent Golfball over the edge. Rage boiled at the center of her heart, stomping towards her with a trembling body. "Take it back," she growled.

"Why would I," said Pencil. "It's true."

And it was. But hearing it from someone like her made the sports ball stomp to the side, furiously adjusting her glasses.

"ENOUGH!! ALL OF YOU- GET SOME WATER FOR THE REST OF US!"

"And who, like, made you the boss of us?" Match snapped.

"I DID. EITHER GET US SOME WATER- OR IF YOU AREN'T GOING TO HELP, THEN GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!"

Seeing as to how the loathsome group wouldn't leave, the scientist scowled. "WELL?! WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?! GO!"

Lately, I haven't been able to stop myself from looking at the hands around me. My friend's faces melt from my memory; their eyes are strangers, as I often meet their hands instead.

Even as I crushed the petals, watching them become nothing but a fine dust, I sprinkle them into one of the cups, brushing my hand clean from its remains.

"What did you say this was called again?" I think to her.

'An Angel's Trumpet...'

"It-.. won't kill him, right..?"

'No way. What use is there in killing him? Vengeance is quite the urge to satisfy- that block has done enough to everyone in the city.'

"Then what will it do?"

'Oh, we'll see...~'

I do this all hidden, of course. We're focused on ourselves and ourselves only, and when I finish, we each bring the cups to the crowds above.

I see everyone. Objects I knew. And I still feel the dread prickling at my soul- threatening me with the possibility of my deeds being brought to light.

Today, at least, I feel lighter. I feel something I haven't felt in a while. Everyone tells me that this is what peace felt like, and for a second, I carefully dip my foot into the sea of serenity, until Scarlet's giggling yanks me back to the rubble.

"What..?" I ask.

'Aw man,' she snickered. 'Looks like we've got the wrong flower~'

"Seriously."

'Hey! I'm just trying to make things more fun- I mean, don't you see that robot's remains over there? Pretty comedic, in my opinion.'

My smile dissipates. "..Do you want me to.. grab them..?"

'HAH! What a wonderful joke, my girl! We need BLOOD, not spare parts- besides. Let's leave the scraps here. I know one of the nerds in that lab will have fun picking through them..~'

My mind flashes back to Basketball. Her relationship- burnt to a crisp due to my decisions. It's enough to make the world spin, bile creeping up my throat as I force myself to keep steady.

'Aww, sorry to ruin those five seconds of peace~'

I shake my head. I'm careful enough to keep my movements hidden from the others, slowly recovering from the whiplash as I continued to roam the rubble.

A few steps ahead of me are the fragments of the gas tanks. Perhaps nobody would have easily made them out, but I still can't risk it. I kicked some debris over the pieces, watching as the ashes snowed on top of them, blanketing from the sky's view.

And that's when her giggling returns.

"Again?!" I utter.

'Aren't you seeing this..?'

"Seeing what?!"

'You really aren't the brightest bulb of the shed, are you? Look around.'

Look around? "Why do you need me to-"

When her words interrupt mine, I find myself realizing what she meant by ruining the peace.

'Do you remember which cup the petals were in?~'

The petals.

It sinks in.

The cup.

The CUP!

I find myself turning left and right. I expected to see a few people with the cups; instead, I found the same cup being cradled in every hand around me. Some aided in the rubble investigation. Others were with Saw and Gaty. And even if the sun was out, there was no smile that met my eyes.

Horror dawns upon me when everyone takes their individual sips. I see Bomby, taking a sip whilst Nickel leaned against him. Liy takes a swig and crushes the cup in her grieving fist. Stapy, who was settled beside the peaceful aura of Saw and Gaty, helped Foldy take a sip from the cup. A few feet away, Leafy took small sips from her own cup, smiling whilst Firey tried to spill Coiny's drink purposefully. My hopes for his success vanish when Coiny takes a drink.

The more they sip, the more I feel nauseated. I was prepared to deal with Scarlet's new plan. I was used to death- far too used to it. But now, fate has taken me by surprise; somebody I know could be next. And I'm not sure if I'm prepared to handle it.

My throat is shut with tears, and I have to cover my mouth when my eyes find Rocky. Balloony was kneeling by his side, helping him with his drink whilst taking a sip from his own. Every now and then, the taller object would speak, and Rocky would lean against him, awkwardly shifting with his prosthetic leg.

I hear Scarlet giggle when Balloony wipes Rocky's mouth. 'Oh, I do hope it's that one! He made a wonderful stool last time~'

I give a small whine. I don't think I could do it again. Maybe.

It wasn't as bad. It couldn't be. Maybe she was right about me being overdramatic...

Stepping aside, I continue to look. Basketball chugs the entirety of her drink. Bracelety tried to take a sip, but her cup slipped from her hands, spilling onto the ground. Fanny offered her own cup instead, and she was met with the other object hugging her. And Fanny scowls. Flower's eyeing her own cup- and I quickly look towards Ruby to avert any suspicion. Holding two cups, she eagerly tries to assure Flower of her safety; it takes her a few seconds until she hesitantly takes the cup from Ruby's hold.

"You're going to be fine," she said. "I promise."

"Ruby..."

"It's going to be okay..."

Oh. How I wish I had the energy to warn them.

I can hear Balloony clearing his throat. Basketball's gags overpower him, diverting my attention towards her direction. Her cup had fallen onto the rubble, and she nearly keeled over, coughing and desperately trying to get a clear breath of air. Next to her, Blocky patted her back, rolling his eyes as she tried to get herself together.

"I warned you," he mumbled. "You need to drink slower next time."

And what if there wasn't a next time?

Maybe I wouldn't be scared if I knew who had the cup. But the same damned patterns taunted me. My friend's hands cling to them. Neighbors take their final sips.

It's when I realize that it could have been any of them.

I'd be giving one a final goodbye.

It could be any of them.

---

latino characters my beloved.

Hi everyone!

This took longer since life got in the way. My apologies! I'm few weeks away from graduating and I am eternally screaming!! Nerves, I tell you.

But we're getting closer to the vessel reveal. I'm aiming for it to happen around mid may (for funny reasons lawl), so if I lock in, we stay winning. ADHD don't fail me now.

Anyways I've yapped long enough. See y'all in the next chapter!

-ice

Nothing is Real

"Alright little one- are you ready to go?"

"Mhm..."

Carefully slinging the backpack over his shoulders, Balloony kneeled down, his hands reaching to cradle the small rock's face. He pressed a kiss on the top of his forehead, just above his permanent scar, resulting in a smile that grew on Rocky's face.

"Well," Balloony stated, clearing his throat. "Let's get everything ready- and I'll walk you to the lab, alright?"

In response to his words, Rocky nodded, watching as the balloon patted the top of his head, standing and making his way to the kitchen and leaving Rocky in the living room.

It was the night that Rocky would be spending with Tennis Ball and Golfball- as the little one had been constantly asking to spend some time with them, like they had done many months ago.

Now, things were different. Despite what everybody told him, Rocky knew that there was something stressing his mo- Golfball and Tennis Ball. He wished he could know why Golfball wouldn't look at him. He wished he could be taken in by them again.

He missed them.

This didn't mean that Rocky hated Balloony and Cloudy- it was quite the opposite. Both of them were the best da- caregivers anybody could ever ask for, especially when they had all first returned from their initial recovery. Cloudy and Balloony didn't hesitate to welcome the little one with open arms, and this, along with meeting Grassy, was enough to help Rocky feel like his old self again.

It had been a while since he had last seen Grassy. Balloony said he had to do something very important. When Rocky had asked about his eventual return, Cloudy promised that he'd collect that answer from his parents. And Rocky knew that when his da- Cloudy, said he'd be off to collect something, he'd bring it right back.

The sun, now making its gradual descent into the serenity of nighttime, painted the sky with pinks and blues. Rocky found himself staring up, taking in the colors he could see, and smiling at the way the colors melted into one another, mixing into the deep, rich blue of the night sky. Stars faded into his vision, one by one, and his eyes soon latched onto the clouds that faintly reminded him of his caretaker.

I wonder if Grassy can see the sky, too, he thinks to himself. *I know he'd see how cool it is...*

He continued to stare aimlessly at the sky, until footsteps faded into Rocky's 'ears'. He knew that his caretakers were walking towards his direction.

"Are you zure you're going to be fine?" Cloudy asked, floating next to Balloony's head. The other, whilst clearing his throat, met his eyes with an easing smile.

"Cloudy, it's a short walk from here," reassured Balloony. "I'll drop him off, and get the strawberries we need for that yogurt you've been wanting to try."

"I've gotta gollect the different wayz they're zerved, it'z how I can determine which one iz better!"

"Trust me, I know." Chuckling, Balloony pressed his lips against the side of his partner's face, as blush spread across Cloudy's stunned expression. Shock blossomed into a flustered smile, and the two chuckled, letting their foreheads rest against one another's lovingly. It lasted for a good few seconds, until a cold shudder jabbed through Balloony's body, resulting in a shiver. His eyes darted around the room, unsure of what had triggered it, but sighed and looked back towards Rocky.

"Do you have everything you need?" he asked, lowering to Rocky's level.

"Yes," he said.

"Then I think we're ready to go. Aren't you excited?"

"Mhm!" Maybe GB could finally talk to me! I have a good feeling about it!

Cloudy flew down to give him a goodbye, nuzzling the top of his head with a smile. Rocky found himself gigging at the gesture, even as Cloudy playfully made sure that his spirits were high in preparation for his reunion with the scientists he adored. Once they wrapped up, the cloud volunteered to tag along, but Balloony assured him that he'd be back before he knew it, followed by his eyes scanning their surroundings.

Although Rocky was much shorter than Balloony, he noticed the way his eyelids twitched. Was he tired? It had been a long day for the three of them. He carefully nudged the side of his caretaker's leg with his prosthetic one, nearly losing his balance before catching himself, preventing him from face-planting once more.

"Easy now!" Balloony exclaimed. His trembling arms steadied Rocky's balance, and with one final goodbye, the two made their way towards the front door, stepping into the comforting chill that radiated from the sunset's aura.

Both walked for an unspecified amount of time, just long enough for the colors of the sky to melt into the familiar sea of nighttime. Rocky immersed himself in the countless stars above him, long enough for that laboratory door to appear in front of him. They were here!

Seconds passed, and Rocky waited for Balloony to knock on the door. He usually knocked with a pattern that the scientists had the ability to recognize, but today he stood in silence. Confused, Rocky turned to face the taller object, being greeted with his arms that were trembling in dead air. His green pupils trailed around, much to the little one's confusion. He nudged Balloony, snapping him back from his state as his hands knocked against the door.

Usually, it was Tennis Ball who'd be answering the door. Tonight, the doors swung open to reveal both him and Golfball, much to Rocky's delight.

"TB! GB!" he squeaked, happily running after them, until his prosthetic leg gave in, slamming him against the pavement. The sound forced GB to look away, her face scrunching with guilt as TB and Balloony rushed to the scene.

Much to their relief, the little one stepped back up with a smile, happily 'hugging' (they sorta bonk themselves together gently. Or hug, if you see them as humans. Whatever you prefer) the larger scientist.

"Hi TB!" Rocky squeaked. "Arent'cha glad I got back up again?"

Tennis Ball smiled. "I am! Look at you- you've been growing so much, even getting a hang of that new leg!"

"Yeah! It was hard, but Balloony really helped me learn! Cloudy, too!"

At the mention of the two, Tennis Ball looked up to see Balloony. The corners of his mouth sunk, noticing the agitated look on the other objects face, his pupils snapping from side to side as if he were seeing something.

His mouth opened to speak, but GB quickly took the opportunity. "What's up with you," she snapped, her eyebrows furrowing towards Balloony.

"Wh-..Huh?"

"You look like you've seen a ghost. What's with the wide eyes."

"GB.." Tennis Ball warned under his breath. Even with the usual harshness from the scientist, the taller object didn't hesitate to answer, nervously rubbing the side of his arm.

"Oh- it's nothing to be worried about," Balloony said. "Just recalling some errands Cloudy wanted me to do.."

"Errands, huh?" Golfball squinted. "..At this hour?"

"Yes! We've been busy, Golfball!"

"Sure."

"What do you mean 'sure'?!"

"I'm just saying- we never asked for you to babysit. You can always tell us if you want to stop doing so."

"Well, I'm sorry for trying to help! Unlike you, I actually pay ATTENTION to little one!"

Oh no.

Balloony's hands immediately flew over his mouth, much too late to try and hold the words back. He noticed the way Golfball's anger spiked, her eyes shooting daggers at the center of his skull. And right then and there, he knew he was a goner.

"H..Hey," he stuttered out. "I didn't- gosh, I'm so sorry, it's-... I haven't been-"

"Thinking? Clearly," the smaller sports ball cut his words off.

"But I-"

"Can we just get this over with please. I'm sure you must be eager to go and get started on those errands of yours."

Yep. He was a goner.

Drawing in a breath, Balloony shook the words away from his mind, opening his arms as he slowly knelt to the ground. He felt himself falling to the side, but was quick to block the fall with his arm- much to his displease, as a soft crack struck from his wrist.

"Balloony!" Now Rocky was the one who rushed to his aid. Smiling, the balloon adjusted himself, pulling in the little one for a warm embrace. While he did feel a little off, Rocky's warmth and cuddles soothed him from the winds of delirium that flew through his mind. Once he looked down, he placed a kiss on the top of his head- just beside the scar, to Rocky's comfort.

"Cloudy and I will pick you up in a week, alright?" he reminded, patting Rocky's side with ease. "Be good.."

Rocky squeaked at his pats. "I will! Thank you, Balloony!"

"Of course..."

Hugging him close, Balloony couldn't help the smile that grew on his face. He was glad that the little one was finding a sense of peace nowadays- especially after the chaos of the hotel- but when he looked up, his eyes captured something that made his heart freeze.

It wasn't enough for Rocky to notice.

Sighing, Tennis Ball let Rocky rush over, instinctively standing by his side. "We're so sorry, Balloony- here, we won't keep you for long. Thank you for bringing Rocky over to us- we appreciate it, right GB?"

Golfball kept her mouth shut, instinctively taking a few steps back.

"...Yep. She appreciates it."

Balloony knew she didn't. But his hands lowered to his sides, the shivering growing worse. "..Alright.. Well, I'll be sure to pick him up in a week.." he uttered, his eyes shifting once again.

"That's-"

"Why can't things get easier." As the voice stopped Tennis Ball's words, all three heads turned to face Golfball, her gaze fixed to the floor. "Why do they always pile up like this."

Tennis Ball frowned. "It... Isn't ideal, GB. But that's how life is- full of ups and downs."

"Those ups and downs are exhausting to face. I can get through them- but... If time could only stop- if the world could freeze, maybe then I'd have a chance of catching up."

"You know that won't happen."

"..I unfortunately do," she uttered. Her eyes trailed down to Rocky's

gaze, and her demeanor shifted; with tear-filled eyes, she hesitantly approached the little one, unable to look at the prosthetic leg she had made him.

"..I just wanted to protect you," she whispered.

"I know," Rocky nodded.

"Whatever I do.. I.. It's all to keep you both safe."

"You don't have to keep me safe anymore.." Rocky, whose voice was once filled with child-like innocence, now carried a solemn maturity. He looked up at the two with the scar striking at their vision. "I'm here now. I wanna protect you guys, too.."

Protect.

Oh. The mere thought of it made Golfball's stomach turn.

Following this, she found herself giving the shorter object a gentle nudge, before trailing back down the stairs. Rocky blinked, a smile carefully growing on his face as he realized the hug he had just received was finally enough to make him feel seen.

It was a gesture that made Balloony smile. But when the world around him plunged to its side, he wobbled on his feet, clutching his chest from shock.

He caught onto the familiar sound of Rocky's voice.

"Is Basketball here too?" he asked, his voice echoing in his aching brain.

"She is- but she's a little sick right now. So we're going to have to keep our voices down for the time being, okay..?" Tennis Ball's voice. Now sounding a thousand yards away.

"Okay!"

The last thing Balloony can clearly capture is the red haze that snaked around the laboratory entrance, snaking into the doors and brushing past the scientist and the child.

And thats when the doors shut.

Bubble always looked forward to nighttime. The tranquility it carried, the lullabies that seeped through the night sky- and the stars, all reminding her of the beauty that she had lost in life.

Like usual, she hauled herself out of the tensions of the new Freesmart Clubhouse. Things were already as rough as they could be, with the entire group now questioning her and Ice Cube's status- not as alliance members, but as friends. And this was nothing short but crushing to her.

Besides yoylecake, the thing that Bubble adored most was the people she held near and dear to her heart. Fanny, of course, was one of them, but even as a friend, she held her close. Same went to all of her other friends, even the objects she barely conversed with. She believed that a natural goodness existed in everybody around her, and that the only way to find it was through kindness.

At least... that was before everything. Before the Pin she knew revealed herself to be something she never imagined.

A monster.

Gosh- the word made Bubble flinch. Her hands grasped at the grass underneath her bandaged palm, and her gaze sadly lifted towards the stars, hoping to take her mind off of the chaos once more.

Earlier on in the day, as the sun was setting, she overheard the conversations that Pencil, Match, Ruby and Book were having. Debating on whether she and Icy could stay. Whether they'd be forced to sleep on the roof again, just like Icy had to do before. Ruby asked if it'd be possible- for the house had a roof unlike that of the clubhouse.

That's when Match mentioned the idea of them sleeping in the

backyard.

Her alliance was changing. As her eyes closed, she wished, desperately, that things could settle down- to prevent such a drastic change from destroying their friendship.

She didn't come to see the familiar blue fan that inched closer towards her, having stepped out from the back door in order to find her there. Fanny hesitated, noticing how peaceful she looked, yet her plug tail swayed gently as she walked to her side.

"Hey," she greeted. Bubble's eyelids calmly lifted, and those loving, sky-blue eyes met Fanny's, causing her blades to spin a little faster.

"Hoi.." Bubble responded.

"What are you doing out here..?"

"Star woitching.." At her response, Fanny's eyes trailed down to Bubble's hands, noticing the grip on the grass below.

"How are your hands feeling..?" Fanny questioned, taking a careful seat beside her. She waited for a response, but seeing Bubble's quivering lip made her plug tail droop in concern. "Bubble..?"

"...How could they believe it. How could they think that we did it on purpose..?"

From the sound of grief in Bubble's voice, Fanny couldn't stop herself from huffing, her eyes snapping to the side. "Trust me. I'm just as angry too- I hate how they didn't bother to listen to you."

"They weren't loike this before..."

Fanny stared at her and blinked. Bubble held eye contact with her, and they stayed that way, until a faint movement tore the metallic soap bubble's gaze away from hers. Curious, Fanny noticed the little yoyle bug that skittered across the field, pausing right in front of the two. The purple spots on their back signified its non-venomous nature, and Fanny couldn't help herself from sticking her tongue out in disgust.

"A bug?!" she snapped. "I hate bugs!"

She expected Bubble to react, but instead, Fanny caught her reaching towards the bug, her eyes glossing over with tears. Her clenched fist unravels, opening her bandaged palm for the bug to crawl up onto. It stares, and a few seconds pass until it hesitantly climbs onto her palm, settling in her warmth.

Fanny hoped to see a smile. It was in Bubble's nature to do so. Instead, she watched as a few tears slipped past Bubble's eyes, trailing down her cheeks whilst she cradled the insect close.

"Bubble..?" Fanny whispered. "I-.. are you-"

"She's so beautiful.."

A hush fell upon the two, with Bubble's sniffles and stifled whines falling muffled in the atmosphere. She lets the bug crawl around the palm of her hand, its beady eyes blinking as it tried to get a sense of its surroundings. Fanny watched for a good while, until she moved herself closer towards her lover, her tail wrapping around her in a firm hold. It was an unspoken reassurance that Fanny hoped she could get across, but Bubble's head sunk in defeat, her eyelids closing with a sigh.

"I don't knoiow if they woint to see me anymore," she uttered sadly.

"Come on, Bubb.." said Fanny. "They're not going to do that- you're in their alliance, or whatever."

"I don't thoink that matters anymore.."

Fanny frowned. But she thinks- recalling every memory she had, from the moment they had met, to the moment she watched her picking up the bug..

"..Despite how much I hate them," she began. "they're still your friends. I doubt they'd drop you like that."

"Mhh.."

Taking note of Bubble's hesitancy, Fanny pouted. Helping wasn't her

strong suit- she was the biggest hater in Yoyle City, after all- but for Bubble, she was willing to move mountains if it meant she could smile again.

The electrical fan collected her thoughts, before a sudden realization dawned upon her. Fanny's usual scowl softened into a neutral expression, as she leaned her bandaged neck against her metallic partner.

"Since your recovery, things have felt different," she uttered.

At her words, Bubble's head turned. "How..?" she whispered.

"I'll be honest- none of us knew what we'd expect once we broke out of that box." Fanny huffed. "I hated that box. But ever since we got you back- after everything... things have felt more hopeful."

Hopeful? Bubble felt her heart sink. What did she mean by that..?

"Oi'm sorry, you-"

"No, I don't mean it in a 'hero' sort of way. I hate how people still don't respect your wishes in that regard," said Fanny, kicking at a pile of dirt. "..It just feels like there's hope around here- Bracelety and I could tell- that despite everything you guys had to face, you're finally able to start on a new chapter of your lives. A better one, at least."

Now, Bubble couldn't stop the tears that flooded in her eyes. She cradled the bug, which crawled around the palms of her hand. Her eyes were locked down, staring at the bandages that wrapped around her injured hands.

Life hadn't been the kindest when everybody returned from their deaths. The reminders, the scars- the nightmares- it had made it impossible to try and welcome every passing day. Screams haunted her memories, now permanently ingrained into her consciousness, of everyone she had come to love. And no matter what she did, they never seemed to leave.

Or so she thought. Thinking back, Bubble remembered Freesmart's state. From Match's inability to withstand any form of heat, to Ice Cube's inability to move a single muscle, she was sure that there'd

never be a way to escape the horror that Pin had unleashed upon them. Now, Icy was up and about. And Bubble could recall seeing Match, talking to her brother without flinching from his heat.

It was there when Bubble realized that Fanny was right.

"You know that it won't ever leave us, roight..? We won't ever.. be the people we oince were.." she whispered.

"Yes, and that doesn't matter to me," Fanny emphasized. Her plug-tail wrapped around Bubble's hand, brushing into her bandaged palm ever-so lovingly. "You're still you- despite everything, you're still you, Bubble. And I wouldn't have had it any other way."

Bubble isn't sure if it was the stars that granted her this moment of peace, or if it was Fanny herself. But nothing could keep her from throwing her arms around the shorter object, a smile wobbling onto her shining face. She felt Fanny burying her face into her shoulder, and her heart fluttered as she could feel her smiling, too.

All she ever wanted was peace. Moments like these, to continue, even through the face of hardship. The thought of it coming to an end poisoned Bubble's mind, slowly sending her into a shivering frenzy, but Fanny's tail caressed against her, patting her back with soft motions.

It wasn't until the bug crawling up her tail, that made Fanny's recognizable pout fall back upon her face.

"Gah!" she exclaimed. "I hate having bugs crawl on me!"
Looking down, Bubble smiled, letting her eyes follow the bug as it trailed up her tail, soon traveling to the top of her head, and plopping down. "Oi think it loikes you..."

"Then why is it sitting like that?!"

"Foinny..." Sighing, Bubble noticed its tiny eyes, and an idea then struck her. "Oh! Whoiy don't we keep it? It's not poisonous- look..."

She let Fanny have a better look at its purple spots, and although the idea made her grumble, seeing Bubble's smile made her eyes glance to the side, a noticeable blush blooming on her face.

"I HATE adopting creatures from the backyard!... But, sure."

Book stared at the two from the kitchen window. Her eyebrows furrowed together, a deep scowl scrawled on her face. But her eyes blurred with tears, and the more she watched, the more her emotions clashed against one another.

She could walk away. She could go to the living room, and lose herself in the books that she had brought from her trip to Barnes & Yoyle, but there's no going back now. Her anger cemented her gaze, and her sadness planted her in that exact spot.

So, here Book stood. Frustrated. Enraged. Scared.

'That liar', she thought to herself. *'She gave me up- and she still gets her own happy ending...?'*

Oh Bubble. Perfect, angelic, innocently fragile Bubble. She makes one grievous error, and the world still defends her. Book avoided her since day one, because looking at her opened a new wound that she never knew she had.

Ice Cube? Don't get her started. Book thought she could make amends with her, but the realization of her tossing her aside overpowered any hope she carried.

While she stood by the counter, a familiar gemstone appeared in the doorway, her eyes brightening at the sight of the guidebook. She waited, letting seconds pass in hopes of her noticing where she stood. Yet she remained unnoticed, and she ended the silence with a cough.

"Book..?" Ruby called. She watched as Book jumped from the suddenness of her name, turning around with widened eyes, before they mellowed down at her familiar shimmer.

"Ruby.." she uttered. "I-.. s-sorry about that, I didn't- see you there.."

"Oh no, it's okay!" Ruby said with a smile. "I was actually looking for you!"

"Huh...? For what?"

"We need to talk." Seeing the way Book's pupils shrunk, Ruby waved her hands with a nervous smile. "No no- don't panic! It's nothing bad! Flower and I-.. we just... wanted to have a moment to speak with you. We've tried for a while now, but- you know.. life got in the way..."

Oh no. There it was- that familiar flutter of hope in between Book's bound pages. She had to calm herself here- it was probably a conversation about how she was doing after her brief period with the shredder- or maybe the constant screaming that came from her room after the nightmares of Pin's smirk found their way back.

With a smile, Book shakily raised a thumbs up, making the gemstone smile. "Perfect! Cmon'- Flower's waiting in the other room!"

"Wait- you want to talk NOW?"

"DUH! That's why I came!" And before Book could deny, the gemstone clasped her hand, smiling as she yanked her away from the spot that she had rooted herself into. They brush by the living room, where Pencil was overseeing Match; she was at the front door, quietly conversing with a familiar flame.

Then they ran by Bracelety, who spun from the speed they ran by. Ice Cube stood next to her, jumping and glancing back with a raised eyebrow, before the familiar green and blue cover forced her eyes to shift away. Pain twinges at Book's soul, until she is met with the familiar room that belonged to both Ruby and Flower.

Book let out a sigh. She did wish to be alone at the moment, but when it came to Ruby and Flower... she couldn't pass up an opportunity to be with them both. It was complicated- some days she despised them, but on others, she did everything she could to earn their gazes. When she did, oh... the sight of their eyes were gorgeous enough to make her melt.

She looked around, her eyes soon finding Flower. She laid on the bed with a sketchbook in her hand, her petals brushing against her cheek while she tapped her pencil against them, trapped in deep thought. Ruby sprung into action, climbing into her arms and letting Flower's arm wrap around her lovingly.

They looked cuter than Book could ever fathom. She pictured herself in between their hug, taking in the synchronous beats of their loving hearts as their souls blazed from the passion of their own connections. Even though they're right in front of her, the daydream zaps a lonely sensation into her. She couldn't. Not while they were together.

Rubbing the back of her scarred arm, Book glanced towards the side, awkwardly clearing her throat. "So," she begins. "You wanted to talk to me?"

Her words bring a smile to both Flower and Ruby. The gemstone pointed at her as if she were asking her to take a seat, but Book shrugged awkwardly. Then Flower waved her hand, and she now had no choice.

Book trailed towards a stray beanbag, plopping on its surface with a raised eyebrow. "Oookay," she trailed. "Any reason as to why you both called me over?"

"Well, Ruby and I have been talking over the past few weeks. About you.. About.. Us. This should have been done earlier, but- with everything going on, we seriously got held up." Flower huffed, brushing her petals.

About them..? Book rubbed her eyes. Well, maybe she should have rubbed her 'ears.' She wanted to make sure she wasn't mishearing a thing. She noticed both of them giving each other a firm nod, and that's when her questions shattered into oblivion.

"We want to include you in our relationship!"

"Are you, like, sure you're going to be okay?"

"Match, please. Leafy and I are on good terms now- there's nothing to worry about. Besides, I should be asking you that-"

"I, like, already told you! I'm fine. Pencil and I are fine."

Firey watched as his elder sister rubbed the burn marks on the top of her head. "...Are you sure?"

"It's just, like, alliance stuff," Match murmured. "Something you'd never, like, understand."

"And what's that supposed to mean?!"

"You know-"

"Guys, please." Pencil stepped in between the two, squinting down at Firey as she pulled Match back. There was no need for anymore fighting- not before they called it quits for the night. Could there ever be a moment of peace between these two?

Rolling his eyes, Firey brushed himself off. "Fine. Well- I need to get back home anyways. Leafy said she's making something special for the three of us."

Match blinked. "...Three? Was I, like, invited or something?"

"Wh- no! COINY, WHAT ARE YOU DOING OVER THERE?!"

"I'm looking!" Coiny's faint response triggered the curiosity in Pencil and Match, bringing them to poke their heads from the front door. Firey ducked, making sure he didn't set the two ablaze with any stray flame of his, before crossing his arms at the sight of the coin in the distance.

He was writing. No surprise there. But his head continued to lift towards the forest, forcing Pencil to toss a glance at her girlfriends' little brother.

"So," she began. "What's his deal?"

Firey shrugged. "Said he's actively looking for clues about the person who set the hotel on fire. GB didn't really stop him from his search- so, like an idiot, he's running around the city for anything he can find."

"And he carries that notebook with him..?"
"Now he does. It was one I gave him when we first recovered. Must be his cluebook, or something!"

Squinting, Match crossed her arms, standing over Firey with a shake of her head. "Don't tell me you're, like, instigating this.."

"W-Well, uh-"

"YES!!!!"

The sudden yell from the clubhouse made the three flinch, their heads snapping towards the direction of the hall. Stunned, they let a few seconds pass, curiously waiting for another possible outburst until Bracelety scrambled out from her room, her eyes widened with bewilderment.

"WHAT THE HECK WAS THAT?!" she called.

"Not like we know!" Pencil snapped. "Was it Ice Cube?!"

At the mention of her name, Ice Cube marched out, a noticeable pout on her face. "No!"

"WHAT ABOUT BUBBLE?!"

"No WOIY!" Emerging from the kitchen, Bubble held Fanny close, looking around worriedly. "WHOIT HAPPENED?! DID SOMEONE-"

"UGH! Then who was it?!"

"US!!"

With a swing of the door, all eyes diverted towards the three objects that stepped out, their arms intertwined amongst one another.

Unsurprisingly, Flower had her usual pompous smile, with Ruby's giggling bringing their gazes over to her overjoyed grin.

That's when they saw who they were hugging.

In between the couple, Book sank into the arms of the two objects, their warmth comforting the waves of anxiety that once destroyed her.

No words were needed to explain the sight. Their smiles spoke a thousand words, after all, and the way Book clutched onto both Flower and Ruby's hand washed away any anxiety that was left in the clubhouse's wake.

After soaking up the final moments of attention that Book was sure was meant for royalty, she waved excitedly, a blinding grin stretched over her scarred cover. "Hi!"

"Oh my pencil factory," Pencil gasped, clutching her scarf tightly. "Don't EVER do that again!"

"Yeah! Sounded like someone DIED in there!"

"...Firey. Was that necessary?"

"Okay, maybe not."

In the mere second, he was met with the glaring eyes of the Freesmarters- that is, until Match's hand slapped over her own mouth, forcing herself to hold back a giggle. Silence. And then, laughter.

A laughter that bubbled through the atmosphere. Even as Coiny returned, even as Firey said his goodbye, there was a split second where it felt like they had returned to the past.

Before anything ever happened.

...Then, why didn't it feel right?

She had what she had dreamt of having now.

Both of them did.

Why couldn't they smile alongside them?

Bubble's eyes trailed towards Ice Cube's. She noticed how her gaze was stuck on Book's, and unfortunately, Bubble had no choice but to give her a look as well.

That's when she caught Book's eyes staring right back at her. Both had a smile. How could they not? The environment was enough to bring them some sort of ease.

But one knew what she had done. The other knows it too- but she is at enough peace to shove that aside for now.

....

She hoped so.

Now that she had it all- it would make her sadness go away. Her fear. Her nightmares- now assuaged.

....

Then why did she still feel that emptiness from before...?

Darkness.

The only thing that Balloony could see.

Somehow, the stars had dissipated, their usual glow now absent from the abyss that stretched over him. Every abandoned building towered over him, their cracks and weeds snaking around them, keeping them grounded in, what might as well be, hell on Earth- Yoyle City.

His heart raced, its palpitations ending violent tremors through his body. Even as he tried to gasp for the chilled air, his throat squeezed

shut, leaving him with the damning feeling of drowning in the night. He recalled the way Cloudy described the evening- how it was a perfect combination of both warmth and cold. But no matter how hard Balloony tried, the frigid air felt like needles piercing through his flesh.

It wasn't this cold. It's spring- the only way it would ever get this cold was during the winter.

Despite this, Balloony found himself shivering. Stumbling. Step after step, the streets seemed to be growing longer, directing him towards twists and turns that screamed unfamiliarities. He clenched his teeth, losing the feeling in his legs, and he knew he needed to find something to lean against.

No way would he be popping again.

Seeing a nearby light pole was nothing short of a miracle. His veins felt as if they were filled with liquid cement, as he found it harder to move towards the pole, despite it being a few steps- no, a few feet?

Balloony squeezed his eyes shut. *Vision, don't fail me now. Come on....*

One step, a stumble, and the balloon found himself bracing his balance against the cold surface of the pole.

Already?

It felt as if it were a long walk away...

No. No, no. There was no way he could call that walking- practically tripping over dead air.

Dead air.

Dead.

A whine broke past his aching throat. On top of the freezing temperature, and his now-cemented body, he found himself losing track of everything that had just taken place. All of his memories melted, merging into the nothingness that was painfully consuming him.

He didn't know where he was. Or where he found himself going. All he knew was the pain that blazed through his body, and the ripping speeds of his heart, causing him to feel faint. He looked around, trying to grab onto any sight that served as a beacon of hope, anything that might guide him towards a sense of safety.

That's when he sees... it.

It..

Her.

No- *her*..?

Balloony saw her earlier- it... no, it was right behind her, it was smiling, it's smiling and it looks like it-

No, NO NO!

I hear my name, and I turn.

I was supposed to be getting things for the clubhouse. For myself. For us. But his voice throws me off my guard.

When I see Balloony stumbling in my direction, my body freezes. On instinct, I try to force my head away. But her hold tightens on my soul as I am forced back.

Hesitation. A little.

Because then, I find myself stepping towards him. Concerned.

I hope it's genuine.

"Balloony?" I ask, my fingers reaching for his shoulder. "Are you okay..?"

My voice makes him shriek. "NO- no, get- get away from me!" *He tries to push me away, his arms waving around like noodles. They shiver, and it's enough to tell me what was happening.* "It's- it's behind you!"

"What is?!" I whisper.

"It- she- oh, she's SMILING! YOU NEED TO RUN!"

"Balloony- look at me!"

"P-Please... I.. I'm seeing things..! I...-"

"Breathe- come on, I can help-"

"WE'RE ALL GOING TO-"

"BALLOONY!"

I grasp the sides of his face, enough to hold him still, but with enough care to keep him from popping.

Maybe I'm trying to save him from knowing. Or maybe it's her trying to keep him from perishing too quickly.

I never know anymore.

The heat that radiated from his face made me flinch. He was burning up. And those reddened eyes of his didn't stop, as they continued to burn holes into the top of my forehead.

That's how I know he got the cup.

....

...Am I supposed to feel.. this empty..?

Guilt.. where was the guilt. The fear.

I take in a breath. I hold, and after a few seconds, I blow it out in the form of a sigh. Seconds tick by until Balloony catches on, his breaths synchronizing with mine in order to properly ease his nerves. I'm not sure how long we stand here for, but the stars twinkle above our heads, and the moon continues to shift, its hushed light immersing us into a glow.

When I hear his breaths now steady and calm, I let my hands fall to his shoulders, blanketing over them gently. "Balloony," I state. "What's the matter?"

He shudders, struggling to find the proper thing to say until the words erupt from his tongue. "I don't feel good."

"Are you sick? What were you doing out here?"

"D-..Dropped.. Rocky off.. And.. feelings.. Got worse.."

Got worse? My eyebrows furrowed together. "What do you mean? Have you been feeling like this all day?" He shakes his head. "When did it start?"

"..After.. Hotel.." *Was all he managed to get out, before he fell into a harsh coughing fit. "Okay," I whisper, easily pulling him away from the light pole. "Come on- I can get you some help, okay?"*

His face lightens at the mention of help. He looks up, his quivering mouth struggling to lift into a smile. "R.. Really..?"

I nod, and his hold on my arms makes me flinch. I know he doesn't mean to cling so tightly, but the phantom pain reverberates through every scar that coated them. But I power through it, my eyes shifting around as I lead him away.

We pass the houses. Pass the buildings. I stare at the charred structure of the hotel. And then we end up on the hill that leads to the woods.

For a while, we walk, we converse, I hold onto his arms, and he desperately clings to mine. Minutes pass, and I come to know Balloony, a kindhearted problem solver who wouldn't hesitate to step into any situation, as long as it meant he could protect those he cared about. He stumbled over the word 'father' whenever he mentioned Rocky, and 'boyfriend' when Cloudy appeared in the conversation. When asked why his harshness had become apparent over the past few days, he stuttered out, "to accomplish".

"Accomplish," I question. "What do you wish to accomplish..?"

"Everything I couldn't," *he whispered out.* "Sometimes, I... I refuse to leave things to other people.. especially.. if I know I can do so myself."

I squint. "Like what..?"

"You know... well, y-you've known little one for.. a good while... GB and TB are busy at work.. with the rest of you... I... I couldn't leave him to be.. neglected like that..."

"GB and TB still care, you know. It's just that- everything lately... it's been hard on everyone, not just them.."

"I.. know... But I won't let him.. blame himself.. for their pain.."

You and I both.

By this point, he knows nothing of where we are. He doesn't seem startled when we stray into the endless array of trees, the atmosphere plunging us into the familiar void of darkness. Despair, which had once caught me off my guard, now embraces me in a welcoming hold, as a small smile creeps up my face.

"Cold?" I ask, feeling his shivering. He nods, sipping a breath of the nightly air. "Don't worry, we're almost there..."

"..Almost.. where.."

"Why, home, of course!"

My distance from the garden grows smaller with every step I take. But it seems like he catches on. For his trembling worsens, and when I feel the slap against my arm, I flinch, suddenly yanking myself away.

"Hey!" I shout. "What was that for?!"

"I can get back..." *he grunted through pained breaths.* "MYSELF."

"I'm only trying to help here!"

"A-And make me seem.. weak..?! Sure!"

"I'm not," I reassure him, reaching for him. "You're sick.. we just need to get you to safety."

Unexpectedly, this makes his angered expression soften. It must have been from the petals, but he urgently grabs onto my arm, making me flinch. My hand flies to my elbow, but I settle, looking away.

"I'm sorry," *he whispers.*

"..I am too." I utter. We turn and continue to head up the hill, and my worry and fear disbands into nothingness. Nobody has caught on yet, about the garden, about the disappearances- about me.

Once I reach the familiar twists of uprooted trees and fallen fauna, what's left is to spot the pair of hands that stay rooted to the ground. I'm careful as I pull Balloony's head from the stray branches that threaten to pop him, because I find myself drifting back to the unanswered questions that looped in the back of my mind.

His eyes continued to look around. What could he see? What could he hear?

Was there something he noted that I could not see?

Traces of evidence that could lead to my reveal?

Or was it... her...? Could he see her? Was she making herself seen??

If so, why couldn't she reveal herself to me?

Why not me?

I shake my head. The fields outstretch before us, and his humming lulls me from the swimming questions I've had. Curious, I lead him towards the garden, as the hands fall into my line of sight.

"Earworm?" I whisper, guiding him away from stepping onto the tulips that swayed near the entrance. He smiles weakly, a chuckle escaping his twitching mouth.

"S..Sort of.."

At least he'll have something nice to get him through this.

As usual, the wheezing in the garden grows louder. Snowball's chest twitched as he fought to break away from his paralysis. Grassy struggles to move, and Tree stares. His eye, once filled with fear, now dulls in defeat, as another is led into the center of my garden. It stays that way for a second, until his body twitches, his eyelid lifting at Balloony's state.

With someone now here, one would expect them to be hurt. Injured. Or, in the other instances, stumbling upon the gorey sights, having mere seconds to react until I step into the picture. And their lights go dark.

But Balloony stood, his body quivering as his head turned from side to side. He uttered something about 'seeing red' and 'hearing whispers all around him', yet I focused on getting him down, adjusting his head on the field of grass below.

The yoylelite burns brighter in my presence, and as I grab my trowel from its side, Balloony manages to speak.

"Am I.. dreaming.." *he utters in between wheezes.*

I stay silent, and he says my name, asking me once more, "..Am.. I dream..ing..?"

"No," I utter.

"Is this.. real..?"

None of it is, I wish to tell him. He is so out of touch, he can't process the environment he is now lying upon, his eyes trailing around the air in a dazed stupor. I kneel down, and I spend some time watching him- the way his chest struggles to lift and take in a breath, and his eyelids twitching, fighting to stay awake.

It reminds me of...

...

Gosh.

It won't ever leave. Yet, there's no point in looking back anymore. No matter what I do, I can't change what happened. I can't force myself to do something- to save her. To stop her- and save the others.

Grabbing his wrist, I proceed to use my trowel to cut his hands off. Blood oozed from the wound, painting over my hands and legs, and I found myself working through with no struggle.

That is, until I hit the bone.

"It's you," *he cried out.* "It's you its you it's always been you it-"

"Is it?" I said, grabbing his wrist. "This may as well be a dream, buddy.."

"No- no you said-"

"It's a dream. Now, hold still-"

"No, it's- h-how could- how COULD you?!"

Oh. We're reaching this point again, are we.

"This is nothing, Balloony. This is just a dream- you're seeing things."

"NO!"

His yell echoes through the air. It makes me jump, and when he lurches towards me, I flinch, quickly thrusting to the side. He gets a face-full of dirt, and I'm quick to shove him against the ground, placing my knees on his back to keep him still.

He thrashes. Screams. The usual. But she blocks it out for me, and I get to cutting.

My trowel, after all it had done before, was growing dull. Its edges needed sanding, and I'm left fighting with the bone, scowling as I do everything in my power to cut through it. But when I'm faced with a mere dent, I stab it into the ground, soon grabbing his nearly-severed hand and forcing his back up.

I count back. Three, two, one, and I lugged it upwards, twisting it with all my strength. A grotesque crack snaps through my brain, and blood slaps against my face, as I watch his hand rip from the bone, pieces of hanging skin peeling all the way up towards his shoulder. They pop with a snap, revealing the raw, pink flesh underneath.

With an open mouth, his eyes are scrunched with tears spilling down his pale cheeks. But I hear nothing. No sound escapes his throat.

It strikes out to me.

She hasn't said a word- I can't assume it's her emotions that I feel

anymore. What if they are mine? If they are- what do I do?

Is there anything I can do?

"PLEASE!" I scream into the night. I grab Balloony's other wrist, my fingers closing around his before snapping it backwards. Then, I bend it forward. Backwards. Forward. Back. And fourth.

The skin on his wrist cracks open, revealing a river of crimson that ripped across.

A scream! Even for a second, I capture the scream that shattered through my world, and it brings me an indescribable joy that one couldn't possibly understand. The pain muted Balloony halfway though, and as I lifted myself from his back, his head fell onto the ground, his eyes glazing over as blood spilled all around us.

I managed to rip his hand off without cutting through. Her chuckling melts into my 'ears', and I glance around, cradling the twitching hand close to my chest.

'Still as strong as ever, aren't you...'

I had to. Remind me to.. Sharpen that trowel. I need to get that done.

'No worries! I can help with that- but first, we've got an airhead to deal with here...'

At the mention, I look back down to meet Balloony's gaze. His eyes... now filled with a deep resentment. Even when poisoned silly, he still can't let go of that attitude of his...

"Here," I say into the air, carefully placing the hand down. "Maybe I should get you settled. That might help you feel a little better, wouldn't it?"

I expect a response. Or maybe a faceful of bloodied spit. Anything to defy the words that left my mouth.

But I'm met with an emptiness.

My eyebrow raised as I poked at his side with my foot. "Did you hear me?" I ask, my voice lilting back to its original, gentle hush. "Should I

repeat what I said before?"

Nothing.

Now, this was getting on my nerves. I fight the urge to frown, so I kneel down once more, leaning closer towards his dazed face. I'm sure that the poison has cemented into his heart, coursing through his veins to offer an experience unlike any other. But I wished to hear something. Anything, even.

"Is anybody in there?" I ask. "Hello?"

Nothing.

"I want to be nice here- isn't that what we're all about? Being nice??"

Nothing.

"I don't want to come off as mean..."

Nothing.

"Or else you'll snap. Just like you had done before. To GB, to the others..."

Nothing.

I bite my tongue so hard, I nearly expected the taste of iron to overcome my tastebuds. Clenching the trowel, I threw Balloony to the ground, watching as he writhed from the pain coursing through his system. "You know," I whisper. "You expect too much from everybody around you."

There, I swung my trowel against his hip, watching as a red grin burst from his side, blood oozing down his hip. I expected a scream, or a grunt, but I'm met with silence.

Silence. Damning silence.

My hands tremble, and I clench my tool harder. "Come on," I hiss, taking another swing. "Do SOMETHING!"

Nothing.

I feel funny and hesitate. I can see rays of sunshine threatening to break

through the night sky at the top of my eyelids; the shifting hues of pinks and blues should have eased me as it had done so before.

But it doesn't. The corners of my mouth lift into a crooked grin, as I hacked at Balloony's hips, violently digging my trowel through his skin and bones. His insides steam out in the frigid, early-morning air, and it forces me to scrunch my 'nose' in disgust.

"You..."

I dug the blade in, and yanked it out.

"You are quite defensive.."

Blood splattered all over me.

"I know you're staying quiet to go against me,"

I stabbed him over...

"But I've experienced this before..."

And over...

"And I won't stop until YOU BREAK."

Some of his blood had made its way into my mouth. But I don't care. My trowel gets a taste of it too- and I keep going until a sickening crunch snaps me back.

That's when he wails.

I see his legs, now disembodied from his upper half. They twitch ever so slightly, kicking at the dirt and grass underneath us. One leg nearly breaks a snapdragon, and our anger flares as one.

"How..." My voice trembles as I grab him by the neck, forcing him up. "How could you do this to my garden..?!"

"Pl-..Plea... aase.." *He whispers.*

"You almost ruined my snapdragons."

"I-.. ghh.."

In between the blood, and the pain, I note the agony for him to construct words. His eyes are red, flooded with tears whilst they searched for any sign of hope. Salvation.

Maybe even death.

Well... death didn't save any of us. Why should it save him?

'Clever question, my dear~'

Oh.. hey there.

'Hi! You're getting the hang of this, hun! It's making me so, so proud...'

It got easier with time.

'And anger...'

...

'Don't deny it. You deserved this... you deserved this fate. Nobody ever dared to think of you as anything more...'

..What do we have in mind for him?

'As per usual, his hands are ours. His legs- just plant those too. But for his body...'

Yes?

'Our garden could use a little more decorations... we have to liven up the place, dontcha think?'

..Like an actual balloon?

'Yes! I'm sure Grassy would appreciate something as magical as a balloon in our garden..'

My eyes find themselves trailing towards Grassy. I expect to see him staring, but instead I find that his gaze is fixed to the sky.

He doesn't cry anymore. He whines. He shivers. But his tears had run dry.

...I suppose a balloon could lift his spirits.

'That's the way to think! I'm sure that thumbtack had some rope in her little shed. Let's look together!'

Quickly. I need to make it back before sunrise.

'Ugh... fine.'

Ever since I began, the garden is now livelier than ever. So many flowers, all carrying different colors and wafting the bitter scent of death from the atmosphere. As I step into the shed, I sift and sort, all until I see the ropes in a cobweb-coated corner.

Jackpot, I think to myself.

'Jackpot indeed!'

Now what are we supposed to do.

'Believe me. I've learned a thing or two during my existence. Objectkind has barely changed- even with all of these... advancements.'

What are you talking about?

'You'll see! Alright- here's how you're going to tie this...'

Tying.

My hands fumbled, and it all clicked together. We're hanging him...? That'll kill him!

'Not with this knot we're tying!'

There's different knots now?

'You have your usual hangman's knot, typically used to execute any criminal in the blink of an eye! It's designed to snap their necks the moment the floor gives in. Their design, killing? Definitely. But this knot... highly unlikely~'

Huh..?

'Before the hangman's knot came into existence, your kind would fail to properly tie a noose to kill an object. They'd be left dangling, swinging from a tree for minutes- hours, even! It was the suffocation that got to them by that point...'

So, you're saying...

'..Poor Balloony.. looks like he's simply going to have to hang in there...~'

Chuckles. Hers, or mine, I do not know.

I tie the rope, and with every blink, I can see her hands over mine, guiding me through the loops and knots I construct. Before I know it, I stare at my first ever noose, brushing against my arm ever so carefully- gracefully, if I do say so myself.

I make my way back to Balloony, who was now pathetically attempting to drag himself out of the garden. He managed to get himself to Snowball's side, where his head pathetically collapsed against his bloodied upper arm. I smirk, waiting for him to realize the lack of any response from the other- until my legs lead me to him, grabbing his neck and lifting him to my level.

"Sorry," I chuckle. "But I don't think you'll be going anywhere."

He begs- nothing new. It was never new.

I toss the noose over his head, clasping the end of the rope and throwing him back to the ground. I pull him along, watching his organs plopping and drooling against the dirt, the vines of the plants embracing them as fertilizer. A red carpet of bloodied fame follows his open wounds, and I drag him towards Tree, who stared at me with that same, damning look.

One toss, and a heave later, I watch as Balloony is lifted into the air, his screams silencing into gargled hacks. I tie the end of the rope far from anybody's grasp, humming under my breath as I adjust the branch that protruded from the top of Tree's head.

"Now you get to feel pretty too!" I told him. He huffs in response, and I take this as a sign to step back, getting a better look at, what is now, my masterpiece.

There stayed Tree. His branches continue to stretch endlessly all around him- even as I continue to cut them down, ensuring his permanence in the garden. His beating heart quivers, blood splurging from his open wound as his eye darts towards the branch I brushed upon.

I'm not too sure if his eye captured the dangling balloon. Even so- I let a giggle free, wiping my hands free from the blood that stained them.

From the branch hung Balloony, the rope tightened around his neck to prevent a single sound from coming through.

His panicked face shifts from red to blue, his mouth agape as his efforts to speak only produced silence. He thrashes from the rope, his chest stifled from his shut airways.

The way his body sways from side to side reminds me of swings. As he dangles, his efforts—the crying, the slugging, the begging— fall silent.

Nothing I'm not a stranger to, at least.

Hanging, Balloony's head lurches to the side with a sickening crack. His pupils sink to the ground, lying there, and his mouth stays open, blood trickling down his quivering lips.

I wipe the blood from my face, and I whisper, "I'm sorry... who knows when anybody will come to your rescue."

A choked sob breaks past his throat.

If it hadn't been for what he said, maybe things would have been different. Maybe this would have left me in tears, as it had previously done. But with the sounds of his fight for air filling my 'eardrums,' it fills me with joy.

Someone so fragile. Weak, frail, pathetic even. Yet, his attitude... something that clashes against him. His downfall was inevitable. His death was inevitable. After all the things he had said to the others.

To me.

I've been nice for far too long now; I won't handle this any longer.

He continues to struggle. I see him attempting to grapple with the rope that constricted around his throat, and I giggle- he doesn't realize his hands are gone.

I search my thoughts for something to say, but the hacks and deafened sobs keep me from thinking, and the melting colors of the sky remind me that the city will soon rise from its slumber. I nod towards the four in my garden, and smirk at the pain in their eyes, as they stare back upon me in what could only be described as defeat.

Maybe being a vessel wouldn't be too hard after all. I've faced my fears. Overcame them.

Now I stand, destined to do what I must.

All to keep them safe.

Everyone I knew.

My friends.

My friends.

---

days until graduation: 4

hi everyone, it's my final finals season. literally. I don't know how the semester flew by so fast but here we are...

this is a special (yet very busy) week for me. graduation from college. uh. I had prom (it was so much fun but I needed an entire day to recover). I also gave a speech at a graduation ceremony on campus. May is a very busy month...

But. stay tuned... especially for friday. trust me when I say a lot goes down this week.

nothing to get hung about (strawberry fields foreverrr)

ok that's enough of me. see you guys later...

-ice

I Love You.

Pin,

I didn't want to believe it at first. I thought it was just from the panic. Then, I thought it was from the smoke inhalation.

Seriously. I can still taste the smoke.

But what I saw was real.

This wasn't you, was it? It wasn't the real you.

Something happened. Something... I don't know what, but.. it wasn't actually you, right?

I didn't expect to see you. I can only thank mint that nobody saw you- your name was never mentioned when everyone was trying to figure out the cause of the fire.

There's no need to panic, either. I know you didn't start it.

She made it very clear.

....was it her, Pin? Was it Evil Leafy who did this?

I don't mean the fires- no, I meant.. you. What you were forced to do.

She must have had something to do with it.

I wish it didn't have to come down to this. I don't know what we could have done to deserve a reality like this. It's silly, but.. whenever I have the chance to, I think about the possibility of a time machine existing- all thanks to TB and GB, of course.

I know, you probably think it's silly, but at least it could bring me back. To warn you.

To save you.

I still have dreams about you. In one of them, I had let you go. My hand slipped free, and I smiled, watching you fall from grace. This nightmare continued to appear, over and over. Until I noticed the claws that clasped at your ankles, dragging you away.

Was it hell that she forced you into? I wish I could agree. For my entire life, you were an angel. You were heaven itself- and now, you're heaven for a sinner like myself.

Your name is fading from Yoyle City. But I can't lose it- I can't lose you again. Everybody's still scared of you, yet I refuse to let you fall into the damned void of banishment (believe me, I've heard Leafy's stories. I've been worried sick about you, ever since day one).

I have so many questions. And with those questions, I have hope. Hope that somehow, despite everything- you're still the Pin I came to know and love, oh, so dearly.

I don't think I've gone through anything as painful as this. All I've ever wanted was a life with you. An existence where we could compete through life's challenges, together.

I still want that, Pin. Mint knows that I do.

....

But I can't get it if I keep pretending here.

I know you don't want me to. But I've helped you for this long. If it makes it any better, I'll bring some extra food and water. More goodies to have, if I find you.

I want to make sure you're okay. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if she hurt you.

If she...

No. No, don't write that. Can't write that. Too much for me to think about.

Nobody knows that I'll be looking for you. Not even Leafy and Firey. Both have been worried sick about me- but it's time I take this into my own hands.

Even if it means giving up my life, or everything I've done, it would have been worth it. I'd do it all for you.

Please, forgive me for everything I have to do. For everything I was too cowardly to do.

I won't say goodbye. It'll kill the hope to meet you again. And as you know by now, I'm the worst at letting go.

I promise, we'll find each other again. And maybe, just maybe, we can have a chance to talk.

...We deserve a gentle epilogue, captain. Because I know- that deep down- we are both good people, and our suffering has gone on for far too long.

Don't stray too far from me now, ok Captain?

I love you.

-Coiny

Coiny picked his path carefully. He was in the familiar thicket where he left his supplies for Pin- and now he had to figure out a way to find where she would often leave.

The only time he watched, was the only time he was nearly caught by her. He managed to hide in the knick of time, and seeing that face of hers was enough to make the roses of love bloom within his heart.

Now, here he was. In the dead of dawn, with a bag full of supplies,

and no Pin in sight.

There was no way he wanted to venture forth without any way of knowing. So he conjures up Pin in his mind.

'Don't worry Pin,' he thinks. *'I'm here now. I'm here. I promise.*'

Moving forward, he got a better glimpse of the woods where Pin had resided in. Tall trees, endless fields. A hill here and there, and, if he turned at the right angle, he could hear the serene sounds of the river, signifying a source of water for her.

Now that spring was in bloom, a meadow was sprouting from the usual purple fields. Little flowers grew here and there, from buttercups, to dandelions, and no matter which one he saw, he was sure to step away from them, not wanting to crush them with an accidental step.

Another turn, and he looks around, scratching the back of his head curiously. Ever since the fire, his train of thought had become noticeably slow, and the thought of Pin kept him up for as long as he could recall. It was the same vision. Pin, reaching for him. The claw. And Evil Leafy's cursed grin.

For a second, he could feel his muscles relaxing, his eyelids growing heavy as a yawn threatened to escape from the back of his throat. He finds himself walking towards the left, until...

Snap!

The sound of a breaking branch zapped any exhaustion away. His reflexes were quick, and in that moment, he immediately grabbed a nearby stone, aiming it over his head with a cry.

"STAY BACK!" He shouted. "I'M WARNING-"

That's when his eyes meet her's. That familiar, scarlet hue. One he had fallen in love with, then feared, then missed... and now, one his heart fluttered at.

"..You.."

"Coiny...?"

Garden Tips & Tricks

The smell of butter wafted through the air.

As did the sounds of popping. Kernels sprung from the bowl, even as it turned with the accompanying hum of the microwave. Through the little glass door, Pen would watch, his hand resting on the side of his cheek.

Days had passed since the incident at the LIVE Hotel. And with the passage of time, Pen found himself readjusting to the sense of normalcy that was slowly creeping back once more.

He wouldn't shy away from it; what happened left him with nightmares. The first two nights after the tragedy reduced him to a panicking, flailing mess, unable to grasp the threshold of reality. Hell, he had accidentally slapped Eraser a few times, even when he tried to help ground his boyfriend from the chaos.

As days went by, the nightmares dwindled into nothingness. Pen was scared, but he had grown to handle his fear. It was how he defeated that silly monster underneath his bed, after all.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

The sound of the microwave snapped Pen out of his morning stupor. Rubbing his eyes, he opened the door, taking the bowl of freshly-popped popcorn into his arms.

"Why are you making popcorn at 8 in the morning?"

A voice that made Pen yelp, his arms twitching and nearly dropping the bowl onto the ground. Bits of popcorn flew around his face from the surprise, and once he regained his balance, a pout formed on his face, unable to stop himself from containing his frustration.

His frustration towards his older sister, Pencil.

"Why are you in my HOUSE at 8 in the morning?" Pen asked, watching as she crossed her arms over her chest. Her scarf swayed with every movement she made, and he noticed how it had become looser.

Something that made Pencil lose her mind in the past.

Sighing, the writing utensil looked down at her younger brother. "Hey, I'm just here to check up on you," she uttered. "Gotta be the older sister here."

"And who let you in?!" Pen asked.

"Think, Ink-for-brains! Who else are you living with?"

A usual nickname Pencil had given her little brother. She still remembered the day she made it; when the two of them were still tiny, and when Pen found himself irritating the life out of her. A smile formed on her face, as she noticed the pink parallelogram making his way around her with a yawn.

"Babe," Eraser uttered. "Why does your sister get up so early..."

Pen placed his bowl down, walking over to give his boyfriend a hug. "Because she's weird," he uttered, smirking at the scowl that dropped on Pencil's face.

"I heard that!"

"Whatever."

"Did I make a mistake by letting her in?" Eraser asked, sinking into Pen's arms. He rubbed his eyes, clearing them from the sleepiness that attempted to shut him down.

It was ironic, he had to admit it. Pen was usually the one who struggled to get himself up in the morning. But after that fire, Eraser found himself waking up in an empty bed, for Pen was already starting his day.

He used to think Pen took morning walks when he woke up before he did. Or, perhaps organizing the house that they had both shared. Maybe preparing breakfast for both of them?

Nope.

Instead, Eraser recalled stepping out of the bedroom to find his boyfriend on the sofa, sniveling pathetically with a tub of ice cream in one hand, and a book in the other. He tried to ask Pen what he was reading, but all he got in response was a wavering cry about "the duckling who lost his mother."

That's when he would notice the book. Sorry- the picture book.

Now, Eraser stared at the bowl of popcorn, confusion fogging over his eyes. Pen gave him a quick kiss on his cheek, leading him to the table and pulling out a chair.

"You didn't, Eraser," Pen said softly. "I'm just- surprised. Why are you out at this hour in the morning?" he asked, throwing a puzzled glance towards Pencil.

The question made the taller writing utensil huff. "None of your business."

"Oh, wait, let me guess- alliance stuff?"

"Congratulations, smartass! Want a medal to go with that answer?"

"A medal?! No way- where is it?!"

Pencil and Eraser exchange a look. Not out of malice or anger- but a mixture of annoyance, as well as hope. He was still just as gullible from Pencil's childhood, and from the day he and Eraser had first met.

But his silliness. His humor- it was coming back to him.

Eraser couldn't stop the smile that grew on his face. Quickly, he reached down, taking Pen's hand into his and giving it a reassuring squeeze. "I don't think she has any medal on her, babe." He chuckled.

Blinking, Pen couldn't stop himself from looking around. "She doesn't?"

"Alright Inkbrain, we get it," Pencil uttered through a laugh. "But, to answer your question there- yes. It's alliance stuff."

"What kind of alliance stuff?"

"You know, 'being normal objects and taking walks in the morning' kind of normal, rather than being an object who eats popcorn for breakfast."

"Leave my popcorn out of this!" Pen pointed at her, defensively shoving the bowl onto the table. "At least I have good taste!"

When silence filled the room, the inkstick couldn't stop himself from noticing the puzzled look on his sister's face, her head tilted on its side as the scent of butter made her 'nose' scrunch. "...Whatever you say, Inkbrain."

"Okay Woodpole!"

"OKAY!"

"OKAY TIMES INFINITY!"

And there, the bickering commenced. Eraser found himself chuckling at the names the siblings threw at one another, staying on the sidelines in case their brawl became physical.

Trust him. Pen told him the stories of the fights he and Pencil had as kids. Once, Pencil had thrown a night light at her younger brother's head as a response from a snarky comment he made towards her. It left him with a scar.

While the two bickered back and forth, Eraser's eyes gazed towards the window, where he noticed the other Freesmarters outside. The first object he made out was Ice Cube, who stood a few steps away from the group.

There was a noticeable look of shame on her face, her eyes drifting towards a familiar guidebook who now stood within the group. While

she was an alternate, Book couldn't help but feel honored when the alliance had welcomed her in as a member, especially after everything she had endured.

The nightmares of the shredder still persisted. Pin's menacing smile haunted her every resting moment. But now, she had the fortune to return to consciousness, feeling the arms of her lovers wrapped around her, ever so gently.

Each morning was the same. She'd awake, her heart racing, her stomach twisting into endless knots from the nausea of her terror. Yet, her eyes would meet Ruby's slumbering expression, and Flower's beauty- it being enough to ease her from any sense of panic that clawed through her soul.

So when Pencil told them that they needed to get back to their original routines, Book couldn't be more thrilled. They haven't had a walk like this in so long, and feeling the rays of sunshine washing upon her scarred cover was an embrace that reminded her of the joys of existence.

Now, the guidebook stood beside Ruby, watching as the gemstone picked up a few stray pebbles, excitedly showing them towards her partners. Book was thrilled to share any fact that she could about the pebbles, while Flower took them into her own hands, excitedly rambling about the possible geodes it could contain. Next to the three, Match scoffed, telling Ruby to put those down.

Did Ruby listen? Well, yes. But even when Match turned away, she quickly picked the lost pebbles back up, giggling as she shoved them into the hands of her lovers.

It was a perfect morning for her. Book couldn't ask for it any other way. Yet, the memories still persisted. Her mind, still poisoned from the trauma and fear, couldn't help but whisper doubts into her own 'ears,' leaving her with a fading smile as she found herself tuning away from the symphony of the world around her.

Eraser's eyes trailed around the group, yet, what dragged his attention back was Ice Cube's solitude. He always remembered Pencil's incessant rambling about Freesmart Alternates, something he

didn't give two shits about.

But after everything... he couldn't tell if she was an alternate, or if she was dead to them as a whole.

The same went for Bubble, who stood quietly by the little block of ice. Her eyes were fixed onto the ground, crawling from the pavement, to the sidewalk; its weeds and dandelions sticking out from the dull tones below her. With fresh bandages, her fingers were curled into her palm, and she, out of all of them, was not there.

Physically, yes. But mentally...

'Oh, what's the big deal. Bubble's don't have brains. Explains why she's acting like a weirdo,' Eraser thought to himself.

With his hand on his chin, the eraser watched as a familiar blue bracelet and electrical fan made their way towards the two outcasts. Bracelety, of course, was shivering with excitement, happily rambling nonsense to Ice Cube, which made the frozen object smile.

As for Fanny, she approached the metallic bubble with care. There was no way she could pop- she found her girlfriend eating slices of yoylecake day by day- but from the look on her face, she could tell that she wasn't in the moment.

Her plug tail brushed along the back of her hand, soon moving to Bubble's back. Movements that carefully brought the poor girl back to reality, her eyes blinking in confusion before softening at the sight of her loved one.

Even after everything, Bubble still found solace in her existence. But nobody knew of the nightmares that plagued her mind.

Ones that had formed after everything she saw.

What she had to face, when everyone around her perished.

It wasn't until Eraser felt a hand on his shoulder that made his gaze break away from the group. He uttered in confusion, turning back to see the familiar sight of his boyfriend.

And Pencil.

"Did I miss anything?" Eraser asked, sitting up in his seat. "What did you guys do?"

Turning, Pencil opened their fridge, rummaging through its contents with a halfhearted sigh. "Well, I restrained myself from slapping Pen. That's one thing."

Her words forced a snicker out of Pen. He leaned into Eraser's ear, whispering. "I brought up the time when she-"

"I CAN AND WILL SLAP YOU PEN. DON'T TEST ME."

"Yes Pencil."

"That's what I thought- seriously, Pen? You haven't eaten the fruits I brought you?!"

Fruits? Eraser couldn't help but stare at her, unable to process the words that had just left her mouth. He couldn't remember a time she brought him fruits- well, maybe, if this damned sleepiness could just get out of his system.

His eyes shifted towards his boyfriend, and judging from the glance that Pen was giving him, he seemed just as lost too.

Restraining herself from cursing at the top of her lungs, Pencil yanked out a large, pink container, one that was filled to the brim with a seemingly endless variety of fruits. "I brought this to you last week!"

"OHHH!" Now, everything clicked in Pen's mind, a crooked smile etching across his face. "S-Sorry, Pencil- I was uh... saving them for something!"

"For what."

"....Y'know... s-smoothies..! Yeah!"

"You barely drank milk as a kid. What makes you think-"

"No, he's right!" Eraser's intervention caught the siblings off guard, their eyes meeting him as he shot up from his chair. "We wanted to try this smoothie recipe from this cookbook we found in this house. We did have a blender-"

Smirking, Pencil placed the container on the kitchen counter, popping the lid off of its surface. "Then grab it!" she sneered. "Grab the blender!"

"We would. If it was actually working." Pen snapped, much to Pencil's dismay. It was a rare moment when he had the opportunity to leave her speechless, and now that he gained the upper hand, a prideful smirk bloomed on his face. "What? What's the matter?"

"Shut up," she gritted through her teeth, immediately shutting the container once more.

"Aww, come on Pencil. Are you mad because I-"

"You two better make these smoothies soon. I dunno how long these fruits are going to last- anyplace else you can find a blender?" Ignoring her little brother's teasing, Pencil turned towards Eraser, who glanced to the side.

"Last time I checked, Blocky had one at his place. Looked pretty new, too."

"Blocky?" The mere mention of his friend's name made Pen's eyes brighten up.

Gosh, it had been too long since the three were together. At least, together for a moment to relax. The fight during Grassy's search was something that Pen didn't want to think about, and the fire... ugh, how it made him shiver.

If anything, Pen didn't care about it anymore. He didn't want to carry the burdens of tense auras and unspoken apologies; all he wanted was to enjoy the newly found freedom that they had gained, ever since they broke out of that stupid metal box.

"We should totally go to his place!" Pen exclaimed. "We could make smoothies there!"

Frowning, Eraser grabbed his boyfriend's arm. "Pen- I don't think we should. He's got a lot on his plate-"

"Psh. Nothing that we haven't been able to handle! Besides, I'm sure he could use the company, especially after Snowball-"

That's when his lips clamped shut. He had almost forgotten about Pencil, who finished putting away the fruit with the gentle shove of the fridge door. Being surrounded by the TLC-er's had him used to talking about the three objects that went rogue.

But the recovered didn't know. Pencil didn't know.

None of them had any idea, and judging from Pencil's confused look, he was seconds away from shattering the peace that she had finally found.

"What?" she asked. "What's with the face?"

"N-Nothing!" stuttered Pen.

"You said something about Snowball. What was his deal, anyway? Did he grow a pair and leave the city after what he did?"

Silence. Awkward silence, at most.

Until Pen grabbed two handfuls of popcorn, flinging them at Pencil's face.

"WH- PEN?!"

"FOOD FIGHT!"

The soft sound of crinkling plastic echoes through the cave, harmonizing with the song of rustling leaves. The wind carried hushed secrets, told by the dead and the living.

But even nature wouldn't be enough to give away Coiny's doings.

He and Pin sat in the entrance of the cave she had claimed as her own, their heads facing away from one another. His eyes scan the woods surrounding them, and Pin's stay locked on the bag in her hands, opening it with a soft huff.

A sweetened scent wafted through the air, and the thumbtack couldn't stop herself from digging in. It was a mixture of fruits that the coin creature had snuck from a plethora of places; the fruit bowl at Firey's place never seemed to run empty, and finding fresh food wasn't as difficult as he had imagined.

So watching as Pin dug into the mix reassured him of his efforts.

Sitting up, his arms wrapped around his knees and pulled them close to his chest. His eyes roamed the trees that stretched endlessly beyond the horizon, and the silence that he finds himself in is nothing short of familiar.

He was afraid of it being awkward. Unfamiliar. The poor thing had to restrain himself from tackling Pin to the ground when he first saw her, thrilled to see that she was still alive.

Albeit, she now had a few bruises. But he didn't want to bring any reminders that could hurt her.

Coiny let her eat. They were quick to lead themselves out of any possible view, and now that they found themselves in the comforting solitude of Pin's new home, he felt as if he could finally take in a deep, clear breath.

He's still haunted by the sight that plagued his vision on that fateful night. Fires still burned at the corner of his eyes, and her smile — Evil Leafy's sickening, fanged smile — burnt permanently into the back of his mind. Unfortunately, nothing seems to wipe the memory away, and he is left in an aimless void of fear, unsure if his safety was truly guaranteed.

Some time had passed, and he let his hand trail towards hers. Hesitant. Yearning, perhaps. Her's pressed flat against the ground,

even as she finished her fill for the day, and when his fingers brush against hers, they curl into the palm of her hand.

"Coiny," Pin whispered. "We can't just sit here pretending like there's nothing happening right now." How he wished he could, for he never liked to face the bitter truth of reality.

"I'm not sure if you saw everything that happened when I tried to get you out. But... I.. I didn't-"

"I know you didn't start the fire," Coiny interrupted her, noting the way her head turned to face him. "There's no need to defend yourself- especially when you didn't do anything wrong."

Didn't do anything wrong...

His words bring a frown to Pin's face. It pained her just to look at him, to see the scar that screamed endless reminders to her. But to see the burn marks from his recovery, and have him telling her that everything she had done wasn't wrong, felt like a lie.

Almost as if he was mocking her.

"Don't." Shaking her head, Pin placed her other hand against her forehead. "I'm not worth your time."

How he eagerly wanted to hold those hands of hers. Frowning, Coiny leaned in, his hands instinctively clutching his chest. "You're my world, Pin. You're worth everything to me," he said.

He's seen the worst in Pin, yet his eyes still gleam like the stars above. What does he see that Pin no longer has? Was he continuing to be a lovesick fool, blinded by the rose colored glasses that shielded him from the blood on her hands?

She couldn't fathom how he still cared so deeply about her, even after everything she had done.

It seems like her confusion was enough to rub onto him. The way her eyes gazed sadly along the ground made him sit up, not hesitating to speak once more. "..Pin. You know that wasn't what I meant."

"Was it?" Pin turned. "All that time- it- you could have known- you.. Could have put an end to it, and-"

"Pin-"

"I could have stopped at any time! I didn't have to do what I did, I shouldn't have done everything, even if I was scared, that doesn't excuse-"

"It wasn't you."

That caught Pin's attention. How could she forget? Coiny saw everything; Evil Leafy's presence was enough to snap him into the realization of something more. She raised her head, turning to meet those copper eyes of his. "..You know..?"

"I want to know. There's something that we're both missing- or at least, I'm missing. There are still flaws, Pin, but after that fire, something tells me that there was more to the story than you just... killing everyone," Coiny explained. "..Especially killing everyone for your own garden."

Pin flinched at his words, and his hand reached over to rest against her shoulder. "But it's over," he reassured. "Everyone is back- and now, I'm right here for you. Whatever's going on now, you can tell me."

Flashbacks of, what seemed like, decades ago flashed into Pin's mind. She recalled the time when he had sat her down like this, in the house that they had both once shared, with her hands in his.

And he had asked her if she was the murderer.

Her eyes flood with tears. "...Coiny.... Why are you-"

"Doing this?" the coin creature interrupted with a solemn chuckle. "What can I say, Pin... after everything, you never really left me. I couldn't let you go... and there was something in my heart, telling me that it wasn't.. All you."

There was a charm that Coiny often held, no matter who he spoke to. It left anyone and everyone feeling safe, his words soothing them into

the conversation; Pin felt that immensely, and for a moment, she found herself staring down at her hands.

She was so afraid of telling him the truth. Not because it was a lie- but because she didn't want to defend herself after everything.

The punishment she was living through was well deserved in her mind, and she didn't want to ruin it by claiming she was innocent.

...But he was here now. Right next to her. And if anyone could offer any piece of understanding, it was him.

Coiny.

Drawing in a deep breath, Pin's head turned to face him as she prepared to tell him the truth. Her eyes closed, trying to muster up the strength to open up about the voice she had heard on that fateful day.

But when her eyes open, she sees it.

She sees her.

Those haunting eyes of Evil Leafy.

In the distance she stood, the same, stoic expression set on her face. Pin's breath was held, her heart nearly skipping its own beat from fear. She knew she could see her- and she knew she saw him, too.

Nothing in this world could have broken Pin at that very moment other than their two faces. After the hell she had quite literally experienced, it was a weapon to reduce her to a crumbling mess.

They stay still for a moment. Until Evil Leafy's straightened mouth curves into a sickening grin, revealing a mouthful of sharpened teeth. Her hand twitched, and with a crooked claw, she pointed at herself....

Then at Coiny.

Tell anybody. And he gets it. They all get it.

Thumbtack.

Confused, Coiny tried shaking Pin's arm lightly, noticing the way her pupils shrunk. "Pin?" he asked, to no avail. With a swift turn, he tried to see what the poor thumbtack was gazing at, until a sudden grunt made him jump.

"I can't," she whispered. "No. I... I'm sorry. You have to go."

"What?! Pin, I just got here!"

"And you know you can't stay."

The coin creature's hand twitched, the urge to hold hers growing stronger by the second. "Are you leaving..?" he asked, a pathetic softness to his voice. Pin's eyebrows furrowed together at the sound of it, and she shook her head, as if she were shaking the idea out of her mind.

"I'm sick of running away," Pin stated. "All I've ever wanted was to feel safe. To feel a part of the friends we've made."

"And you can Pin. I promise, I-"

"Don't." She cut him off with a flick of her hand. "We both know what happens when one of us makes any kind of promise."

From there, Pin waited. She waited for him to get up, to accept the fact that she was nothing but a monster, and someone that would never return to the society she had come to love, but he didn't. His eyes stared into hers, and it pained Pin to realize just how much he cared.

Especially when nobody else did.

"They don't care anymore, Coiny," she spoke, her head turning away. "I've come to accept my place out here. Besides, who else would ever need me after what I did."

There was an absence of any self-pity in her tone. As much as Coiny didn't want to admit it, she was right. Everybody in the city still hated her. Those who weren't victims of her wrath aimed to wipe her name from every memory of those around them. The victims, on the other hand, called for retribution. Or they wanted to forget.

Their stories had a chance to continue. They could live the rest of their lives in Yoyle City, competition, or no competition. And that's when Coiny realized there was only one object of them all that would never change, even if the world around him did.

Him.

No longer afraid, Coiny let his hand stretch to hers, carefully taking it into his hold. "..Me," he said. "I do."

Stunned, Pin blinked, trying to take in the words that he had said. Was he serious? She had a chance to tell him everything, and even when she didn't...

"I couldn't even.. Say.. I.." Her incomplete words fell on deafened ears, as Coiny lifted her hands from the ground, holding them close to his scar.

"That doesn't matter," he reassured her. "We'll find our way there. We just need time."

Time. Pin hoped they had enough time to blossom into that moment. To tell him everything, without threatening his own safety.

Not only that- threatening the safety of those she still cared so deeply for.

Sure, she was banished far into the woods, away from the memories she had made in the city. Good ones, for sure. She never looked back on the ones of her wrongdoings.

But even with this guilt, this resentment and anger- she didn't wish any ill will upon the objects she had once called her 'friends.' Throughout her time in the forest, she worried about them, hoping that they could find their peace.

Even if she never found hers.

With tears now glossing over her eyes, Pin braced herself, getting a better glimpse of that coin's face. One she adored getting lost within.

"..Do you think we could make this... work?" she asked.

Coiny's eyebrow raised. "Make what work?"

"Us."

No longer caring about the murders, no longer caring about the Scarlet, Pin realized now that there was one thing she still longed for, out here in the forest.

It wasn't until she noticed the way she was clinging onto those warm, soft hands of his, when she realized it.

After all, he was here. They were here, together, even after all this time. No matter how much she'd inevitably deny it, Pin didn't have the strength to let it go.

Pin stared, her hands now trembling as she waited for Coiny's response. His thumbs would brush against the back of her palms, and she looked up.

"..We can," Coiny answered, followed by a hesitant sigh. "But. Can we start over? Can we put this away?"

"...Pin."

"Hm?"

"My name is Pin."

That's when Coiny smiled. A smile Pin had missed. And when she smiled in return, sunlight poured into the airy atmosphere around them, just in time for the two to lean in, their lips pressing together for a loving kiss.

"It's so sunny today.."

"Perfect weather for gardening, dontcha think?"

"Almost as perfect as you."

"Gaty!"

The sudden compliment made the small trowel slip free from Saw's grasp. Flustered, she immediately tossed a small seed towards Gaty's path, forcing the other to swing from its intended target.

"Gah!" Gaty laughed. "Watch it!"

"I'm getting you back one of these days, y'know!" Giggling, Saw looked down, brushing her gloves free from the dirt that accumulated on their surface.

It was a sunny afternoon. The city was now buzzing with life, as everybody finally accumulated their own schedules. Without a cloud in the sky, the hopeful rays of light dawned a new beginning on the citizens of the abandoned city, reminding them that the past can no longer hurt them.

New beginnings awaited everyone. Now was their chance to finally chase after them.

For Saw, it was her community garden. She never expected the idea to blossom into something that the others would enjoy. Yes, there were a select few that refused to go anywhere near it- she could feel Teardrop's angered gaze burning holes into the back of her head- but for the most part, there were many others that enjoyed the lively sight of the many flowers that blossomed in their paths. Red tulips glowed with life, and chrysanthemums radiated from the joy that they carried.

It was hard for anyone to miss.

In the beginning, both Saw and Gaty were the only ones contributing to its blooming state. Then came Fries, who now had a lovely field of growtato plants sprouting from the healthy soils below. And then Woody, who, at first, was petrified of stepping anywhere near the garden. Being gently encouraged by both Bottle and Pie helped him face his troubles, and over time, he had little to no trouble in holding a potted plant.

Like now. With shaking hands, he placed the newly grown sunflower in his respective spot, smiling as Casper crawled over the unearthed pile of dirt. Their tongue flicked, and Woody gave them a pat on the top of their head.

Next to him, Pie ensured Casper's safety, smiling at the way they got along with Woody. But in the corner of her eye, she noticed Bottle, who gazed sadly upon the growing crowd around them, her eyes dimming from their sparkling hue.

"Hey," Pie nudged her. "You good over there..?"

Hesitating, Bottle lowered her head, speaking in a hush. "..I have to go soon.."

"To find Tree?" When Bottle nodded in response, Pie frowned, carefully sitting herself away so Woody couldn't hear. "Bottle- are you sure you want to do this again..? I thought you looked everywhere.."

"I haven't," Bottle replied. "I'm not going to stop until I find something."

"But Bottle-"

"He's still out there. He's still out there and he could be-!" The glass bottle stopped herself before she could finish the thought.

She didn't dare speak it into existence. But this was something she had to do alone. For she swore that she'd be the one to find Tree's whereabouts, no matter what.

And all Pie could do was offer any form of support.

Along the colorful patches of freshly grown flowers, both Blocky and Basketball let themselves wander through the garden, hoping that the scene could take their minds off of the stresses that plagued them.

Poor Basketball had fallen ill a few days prior, but the ailment was finally wearing off. Faint, red dots could be seen on her skin, but she conducted many tests during her brief period of rest. And nothing could be found.

So, here she was. With a mask to prevent herself from spreading any germs, she gave herself time to receive some fresh air, wandering through the community garden with Blocky.

For a while, it worked. Until the sight of a blooming patch of flowers made her world fall into silence.

The scientist didn't know who had planted the patch of anemone pink saucers. Even so, it didn't matter. Because now she was trapped in the damned ocean of static once again.

Blocky caught onto his acquaintance's episode, and to try and get her out, he'd speak, until her words crashed through his attempts.

"Did you know that some people see their loved ones in their dreams?" Basketball whispered. Blocky, now thrown off, replied to her question with a slow nod. "Have you... did you-"

"No. I haven't." The faint image of Snowball and Grassy appears in Blocky's mind. "It's the only way I know he's still here."

While Basketball did know of the relationship that the block had with Grassy, she found herself growing curious, never wondering about the relationship he himself had with Snowball.

She never got along with him- let alone, either of them- but Grassy viewed the two as his own fathers. And Basketball would continue to respect that, to the day she'd die.

"Do you miss him?" she asked. All Blocky could muster up was a saddened chuckle, followed by his hollow reply.

"More than I've missed anyone in my life."

"..I'm sorry-"

"He was my life. Mi vida. Y nunca tuve el valor para decirlo." (My life. And I never had the courage to say it.)

Now, they returned to the silence that hung between them. Second after painful second, both remained by each other's side. Basketball struggled to form the words that encapsulated her sympathy, but

Blocky's voice interjected.

"Lo extraño.." he murmured. "Cada día, y cada noche.. No puedo regresar a nuestra casa. Solo trae más dolor." (I miss him. Every day and every night. I can't go back to our home. It just brings more pain.)

Having grown used to Golfball's Spanish, Basketball faintly made out a few words she could recognize.

"I know how you feel," she replied with a whisper, hesitating. "...It's.. why I'm trying to build the two recovery centers we had started."

"I thought we already had one..?"

"She and I wanted to start building newer ones. Just in case." *And for the mechanical minds*, Basketball thought to herself. "..I also wanted to rebuild her, and-"

"Who- Robot Flower?! That's the thing you're worried about right now?! Even when he's MISSING?!"

"You don't understand, Blocky. I-"

"I LOST MY BOYFRIEND BASKETBALL."

There.

In that moment, Blocky had admitted it- something that had lied so dormant in the crevices of his aching soul.

Now it was brought to the exposing sunlight of the afternoon. And whilst he felt the weight of his worries lifting from his shoulders, there was no one around to celebrate it with.

The one he had wished to share it with was gone.

"Snowball..." he whispered under his breath.

Even in his moment of grief, he noticed the way Basketball stepped to the side. Guilty. Shameful, almost. Maybe he was being too harsh on her- not letting her have a chance to grieve over someone she knew

better than the rest.

...Well. There went any chances of finding some common ground with her.

On the surface of the city, their day continued as normal. Freesmart wandering towards the Town's Square, and others conversing.

More and more people contributed to the garden as well. Liy, who was often on her own, quietly planted a batch of orchids, tending to them whenever she could.

There were other plants she had in her little corner. Carnations, forget-me-nots, roses- but her orchids remained healthier than the rest.

It was a sight that tugged at the curiosity in Saw's mind. But seeing the little fragment of Remote's body in its wake was more than enough to tell her everything.

Many were out enjoying the weather, stopping by to converse in the town square, whilst others paid a visit to the community garden itself.

The winds carried the endless conversations that were held all around her, and it filled Saw with such joy, so much so, that she nearly missed the sight of her two best friends in the distance.

Catching sight of Lollipop and Taco, Saw couldn't stop herself from waving her hands excitedly, beckoning them to make their way over. She didn't seem to mind when Gelatin came into view, both chatting away with every step they took.

"GUYS!" she called out. "OVER HERE!"

At the sound of her voice, Lollipop and Taco waved goodbye to Gelatin, who rushed away towards a different area of the garden. Curious, Saw spoke towards the two as they approached.

"He could have come along, you know!" she stated.

"We know! We hear you loud and clear, little gray zig-zag," Lollipop

acknowledged. "We're not going anywhere else."

"Did you bring the seeds you wanted to plant??"

Smiling, Taco lifted up the small bag in her hands. "I got my delphiniums. Gelatin wanted to come by and visit Fries for a bit and Lollipop's just here for moral support."

"Excuse me- I am here to garden as well!"

"So what was the whole 'getting dirt everywhere' rant about?"

"....Move over, Taco."

After the brief period of giggling and teasing, Taco moved to the side, not hesitating to dig into the earth below. While she dug, many conversations melted into her mind, with her making out Gelatin's voice in the near distance.

She swore he had come to talk with Fries. But hearing Donut's voice nearly made her look up, wanting to see what the dessert was going on about.

"Gelatin, please," Donut grumbled. "We're trying to finish planting our snowdrops here..."

The green object scoffed. "Hey! I'm only asking Barf Bag a question!"

"You've been rambling ever since you got here!"

"It's how I warm up! So, Barf Bag- Got any plans for your big day?"

Barf Bag's hum filled the air. "Well... Donut promised something special. Knowing how kind he can be, I can only imagine what he has planned, haha..."

"You two are so cheesy! He RARELY smiled before you two met!"

"GELATIN!" Donut's flustered shout made the two objects snicker, even while he tried to stop the blush from clouding over his face.

Taco smiled, shaking her head as she opened the packet of seeds.

Another voice caught her attention, even as she focused on planting them in the crater below.

"Look Foinny," Bubble's accent struck Taco's 'ears.' "It's a blue voilet! Here!"

With a swift pluck, the metallic soap bubble handed Fanny the flower, and Taco glanced over, chuckling as Fanny's blades were spinning out of control, blush burning at the center of her face.

"I haaaate blushing..." Fanny growled under her breath. Smiling, Bubble placed the flower on the top of her head, adjusting it so it could stay.

"Oi think it's cute.." She giggled.

A murmur.

"What was that, Foinny..?"

"I think you're cuter, Bubb..."

"Eugh. How gay could this garden get?" Lollipop's words snapped Taco's attention away, sitting up as her girlfriend took the lemonade that Saw had generously offered. "I thought this was supposed to help people."

"Believe me, it has," Gaty smiled. "I'll admit, it was a strange idea at first. But seeing everyone get together is always nice. Plus, things are finally feeling like they're back to normal!"

"Still as gay as ever..."

"Says you," Saw smirked.

There goes Lollipop's chance for a rebuttal. As Taco continued to plant the seeds, she noticed Leafy stepping into the garden, being guided by Firey, his flames now metallic to avoid burning anything he came across.

"Are you sure this is a good idea..?" Leafy whispered, her eyes frantically scouting the perimeter as the memories of before haunted

her vision. Smiling, Firey pulled her to a blank patch of land, giving her hands a smooth caress.

"I promise," he said. "It's going to be worth it. Everyone I spoke to said it helped them- and, hey! You're a plant, too! Maybe it could help even more!"

"Oh, ha ha."

"What?!"

Leafy squinted at him. And his mouth clamped shut. Awkwardly clutching the seed packet in her hands, she stepped over the blooming flowers, preparing to get them into the ground. She feels herself loosening up as her eyes spot the daisies nearby, and the waft of freshly-grown roses steadied her nerve-wracked arms. She took a moment to look around, until the hand caught her-

Wait. No. It's not a hand. No, it couldn't be. It's a petunia, Leafy repeated. It's just a-

Hand.

That's a *hand.*

There is a hand right there. Next to you. Look.

LOOK.

LOOK!

With her section of the garden now ready to go, Taco enjoyed some time with her friends, telling Saw about Lollipop's new business idea, when the first knife rips through the air near Saw. All heads turn, just in time for the second knife to slash against Saw's face, striking her across her eyebrow.

Startled, the poor girl scrambled back, accidentally crushing the

flowers beneath her. That's when Leafy slams her into the ground, forcefully grabbing another knife from her back and pinning it against Saw's throat.

"YOU!" she screamed. "YOU AREN'T DOING THIS AGAIN!"

Even with the panicked voices surrounding her, Saw found herself speaking. Pleading for her life. "I-I- I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING?!" That's when she screamed. "HELP ME!"

"SAW!" Gaty's voice breaks through the tension, until Leafy presses the blade against Saw's throat, effectively silencing her.

"You killed someone. You- You plant their hand, right in this garden. LIKE IT'S NOTHING BUT A JOKE," Leafy hissed with a scowl. "WHO DID YOU KILL?! WHO!?"

Saw attempted to wriggle free from her grasp, but Leafy's knee jammed into her abdomen, her other leg pinning her arm to the ground. For a moment, she grabs the top of Saw's head, her panicked eyes wickedly scanning her until the blade comes into view.

"I'M PUTTING AN END TO THIS!"

"LEAFY!"

Bracing herself, Saw's eyes shut in terror. Expecting her senses to plunge into nothingness. Instead, something larger yanks the lemon leaf from her body, and the air makes its way back into Saw's lungs. She laid there, stunned, until the world slowly pieced itself together around her, and the voices of those she cared for made its way back.

"SAW?! OH MY FENCE, IS SHE HURT?!" Gaty...

"Just some cuts. For Sugar's sake- let's get her home." Lollipop...

"Bubble, are you sure you got her?! She could-" Taco... and then..

"OI CAN HANDLE HER! GET SAW OUT OF HERE! GO!"

When she's lifted from the ground, Saw captures a better look at the world around her. Leafy was now thrashing violently in the air,

angrily waving her last remaining knife as foul words spewed from her mouth. She is imprisoned in Bubble's grasp, who's concern radiated from her face. Freesmart stood a few feet away from the three, not wanting to get caught in the chaos, but when Book's glare found its way to Bubble's eyes, she immediately glared back, a scornful frown growing on Book's mouth.

Saw's heart raced. And she only had enough time to see Leafy getting injected with a new dose of freeze juice, until she succumbed to the darkness, passing out.

After providing Gelatin with the dosage of freeze juice, Basketball was left to wander aimlessly, not caring about the chaos that unfolded behind her.

Firey was quick to take Leafy back to their home. Freesmart, although they were tense, agreed to call it a day, trudging back towards their new clubhouse in a heavy silence.

She noted the way Book sank into her lover's arms. And Basketball's chest tightened.

No. Come on. Don't feel this way- she had it hard. Hell, she had it worse. She deserved this happiness.

No longer caring about where her legs took her, Basketball trailed away from the community garden. The voices surrounding her fell into a hush, and she blinked, soon taking in the sights of the underground laboratory.

One left. Another right. And she's back in the dimly-lit experimentation room. There, the two unfinished recovery centers sat, being tinkered away by Basketball, despite her sudden illness.

Hearing the faint conversation between her cousin and Golfball resulted in a sigh, as she grabbed her tools, preparing to dive into her unfinished work once more.

It was what she did best. When she couldn't feel, she worked. Better than sitting around and doing nothing.

Better than letting everybody down.

While she worked, the faint creaking of the door resulted in the hallway lights pouring into the darkness. She blinked, turning to see who had made their way inside.

First, she made out the small pair of rainboots that were left untouched by the door frame. Next to them stood Rocky, who stared at her with a curious gaze.

They stare at each other. No words being said. But when Rocky's eyes follow Basketball's towards the rainboots, she found herself breaking the silence.

"Go back to GB. I'm busy," she demands. Rocky blinked, not saying a word. "You don't understand. I'm very busy right now Rocky. Go. Grassy's not here."

"Grassy?" His little voice sparks an anger in Basketball's heart. He approached her. Curious. Hopeful.

In the blink of an eye, Basketball swore she could see Grassy walking towards her. And that's when she shattered.

"JUST GET OUT! HE'S GONE! HE'S GONE!" she screamed. "HE'S NOT COMING BACK!"

And when the truth broke past her lips, Basketball couldn't stop herself from sobbing. "Please... get out..."

Never did she expect to cry, so late, so long after everything had happened. Weeks after she lost Grassy, days after losing Robot Flower- all spent in the static caverns of emptiness, grasping at any emotion she could possibly fuel.

Yet, they hit now. Here, of all places.

A sound comes out of Basketball's throat. A sob, a scream, an outlet to the grief she carried for so long.

Rocky stayed silent, but his eyes welled up with tears. He wouldn't leave- no matter what she said, Rocky didn't bother to leave the room. He stepped towards her, carefully nudging himself into her embrace as sobs crashed through her body.

With no windows, no sunlight dared to enter these parts of the lab. This darkness held the dreary atmosphere that Basketball confined herself to, and her wails echoed all around her, presenting the grief that had clawed at her endlessly.

Sobbing, Basketball found herself embracing Rocky, burying her sniveling face into the top of his head. He didn't want him to know- nor did she want anyone from his family to know the truth of what happened.

In the darkness they stayed. Rocky's presence comforts her through the pain. Basketball apologizing for her inability to help.

But they comfort each other; both of them serving as a reassurance to their mistakes. Their tragedies.

And their strength.

From the moment we saw that garden, her anger drowned any remaining thought of mine. No matter how hard I tried to hold on, any bits of peace I had vanished. And all I felt was her rage.

How dare they.

How dare they take what should have been mine.

Ours.

My fists clench. With everyone back in their homes, I trail towards their front door, knocking on it gently. Seconds pass, followed by a soft click, and the clean swing of the door.

When I come into Gaty's view, her eyes blink in confusion. She says my name a few times, until I manage to speak.

"Hi Gaty," I greeted.

"What are you doing here?" Gaty asked. "I thought you went home with Freesmart."

"I did. But I just wanted to apologize for Leafy's actions earlier. What she did... It was horrible."

The mere mention of her name makes Gaty's face drop. She braces herself, turning her head to the side. "...I've been trying to help Saw cope with the incident. She's feels really guilty about coming up with the idea, and-"

"She shouldn't!" I exclaim.

"What..? But, we figured that you'd-"

"No. You both were right with this idea- but maybe we should try and move the garden to another spot... somewhere we can still visit, but in a space that isn't.. You know... in front of us."

"What's in front of us..?" When I hear Saw's voice, Scarlet giggles from the deepest crevice of my soul. I wave as Saw comes into view, and she greets me back, giving me an awkward smile.

"Sorry about.. everything.." she uttered.

"Saw, It's okay. I promise."

"But-"

"Trust me. I love this idea- and I know the others do as well. But we need to find a more comfortable place for this community garden, and luckily, I know the perfect spot where we can do so!"

For a moment, Gaty and Saw exchange a glance. That's when they both shut the lights in the kitchen off, with Saw eagerly rushing to my side.

"Please show me!" she begged. "I-I still want to help! In any way that I can!"

"And I'll tag along too," Gaty reassured us. "It's best if we stick together, right..?"

Oh, it is.

'Believe me. It truly is.'

As a group, we slide out of the city's view and into the fields that lead to the forest. I convince them that it isn't too far of a walk, and throughout the journey, I tell them everything that I had learned from my experience with gardening.

"That's why your garden took so long to flourish," I say. "The buildings are tall enough to block any patch of sunlight that can get through!"

"I see..." Saw tapped her chin in thought. "But what about here?"

"Yeah... Seems like things could be just as bad out here if we move all of our plants.." Gaty chimed in. I shut their worries down with a quick lie.

"There's this clearing I came across. The sun hits it just right- and it's on a good spot near the hill!"

I talk. More, and more, and more. While Saw grows fascinated with my words, Gaty's eyes become darkened with worry, as they continue to shift away from my gaze. Because of this, my pace picks up, and we soon dive into a full on sprint.

I have no time now. Gaty is telling Saw to turn back. But Saw urges her to follow. For she wanted to help.

She just wanted to help.

And when I peek over the tree that I now hid behind, I giggle- for this is what happens when they try to play some sort of hero.

It's not easy. Nor is it fun.

But I grin. I snicker at the way Gaty screams at the sight of Snowball's brain. And I especially laugh at the way Saw stumbled back, her eyes locked onto Grassy-

Oh. Stumbling away?

I can't have that now.

Swiftly, I grab my pitchfork. Step. Step. Step.

I let them cry. I let them speak.

"Saw- Saw, we have to GO-"

"B-BUT WE- WE CAN'T LEAVE THEM BEHIND!"

"SAW, SHE'S STILL OUT THERE!"

"GATY-"

"Going somewhere...?"

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days until graduation: 3

I submitted my last assignment ever. strange feeling. it is stranger than anything I could ever describe but we are winning.... I am DONE

anyways hi again. I told you this would be a lighthearted chapter!

the next ones will be even better!

ok. gotta go. super busy. BYE!

-ice

Bones, Crushing

Crunch!

My hands react before my brain can and I plunge the pitchfork into Saw's leg.

A mist of blood slaps me in the face, and their cries grow louder. But I don't panic.

What to do? Who to get? My eyes flicker between the two, a scowl growing as I pull the pitchfork out.

More blood. Gaty, who is now losing her cool, stumbles to Saw's side, frantically trying to get her back up. She's at the entrance, right by the hands that welcomed them into the garden, but the wheezing from the corpses behind them served as a reminder of their entrapment.

I step forward, smiling, as I clutch the bloodied pitchfork in my hold.

"Well," I speak. "What do you think? It's a nice clearing for a garden..."

Shivering, Gaty's eyes narrow. Her words hiss through her clenched teeth. "..You..."

"Yeah. I know it's me. It's unbelievable."

"You're doing this- YOU'RE STARTING THIS ALL OVER AGAIN?!"

"I dunno. Maybe you should look behind you and answer that for yourself."

No one speaks. I see Gaty writhing with rage, drawing in a giggle from Scarlet.

'Well, someone's mad..~'

Looks like she's ready to pounce.

'Aw, but how could she do so? Her pathetic little girlfriend can barely keep herself standing...'

When her giggling dies down, Saw chokes out words I cannot understand. Her lips moved in a panic, desperately clinging onto Gaty's sides as the two tried to regain their composure.

I raise my head, and my smile serves as a reminder; they cannot avoid what is to come. The few remaining eyes in the garden are presented with new victims, fearfully clinging onto one another, mere feet away from a possible escape.

Yet, their chance of freedom is separated by us.

By me.

How tragic. But those four needed to get used to it.

I did.

'Right you are, my dear. Now. Let's spin the wheel to see who goes first!~'

...We don't have a wheel.

'...Question me again, and everyone you love will end up beneath us.'

I flinch. Tough crowd today. Someone really didn't like the idea of another garden blooming to life. I'd say something, but her anger served as a reminder for me to get back to work. So I clench my pitchfork, and my gaze returns to the couple.

I make sure to steer clear of the flowers around us. The distance between us dwindles, and I find myself standing above them. None of us speak. Our eyes freeze, waiting. Our breaths held.

It wasn't until Saw lunged forward that my fists slam into the center of her chest. Her sense of balance perished and she tumbled straight into a thorned bush of roses. The thorns, now fully grown, pierce through the girl's skin, and blood pours like the red sea, splattering into bloodied roses on the ground.

Thank goodness we're far from the city. Nobody can hear her scream.

Behind me, I hear Gaty screaming. I'm shocked to see how she hasn't fled, but I shake my head, realizing it wasn't out of any malice, or any stupor.

It was love that kept her here.

And her lover was right underneath my palms, her blood draining into the thorns below.

"STOP!" *Gaty screamed, hesitantly approaching me. I tilted the pitchfork to her gaze, forcing her to freeze, almost like I had casted a magic spell.*

"G..Gaty..." *Saw whimpers.* "Please- G...GO-"

"I'm not LEAVING YOU HERE, SAW!"

"She's right, you know," I intervened. "Neither of you are leaving... unless you can help me with a little something."

Aghast, they both stare back at me, watching as I pull away from Saw's entanglement. My eyes stay watchful, even while I step away, grabbing the spare supplies that lay hidden in the shed.

Scarlet told me the collection of items that Pin kept in here. I find myself questioning it at times- at least, I used to. Because now, I can only be thankful that she kept a notebook, keeping the status of her garden in the form of an organized list. When I see the shovel in the corner, I don't hesitate to grab it, yanking it from the darkness that consumed its presence.

With the supplies now in my grasp, I sigh, noticing Gaty's pathetic attempts to get Saw free from the bush.

They both hear my footsteps. Unable to decide on what they should do, I smile. "Leaving so soon..?" My voice, so different from what I had remembered.

My trowel stays in one hand, and as I grab my pitchfork, it slips free from my hands, whizzing through the air and a sickening crunch signifies an impact. There's no way I can hold myself back from laughing, watching as blood trickled from the corner of Gaty's mouth.

That's when I see her, being pinned to the ground, with the blades of the pitchfork rooting her motionless.

"STOP!" *Saw begged.* "LEAVE HER ALONE! PLEASE!!"

I look up. "Oh, I'll stop. When you start writing."

"Wh-.. what?!"

"Come on. I can't write your goodbye now, can I?" I wave the pencil towards her, holding out the notebook with a bloodstained hand. "You're gonna have to write your way out of this one if you want her to live."

Sure enough, she stares back at me, the color draining alongside her blood. "Don't make me do this, please..!-"

"WRITE!" I yell through gritted teeth. "Or else your girlfriend gets it."

I spot Gaty in the corner of my eye, writhing on the ground in pain. Even as my hand dropped onto Saw's shoulder, she continued to scream for her. "SAW- DON'T DO IT-"

"O-OKAY, OKAY!" *Saw's desperation mutes her girlfriend's pleas. As I give her the pencil, I can feel Scarlet looming over us, and soon, her tongue becomes mine- for the words I say next, are none of my own.*

'To those who come across this letter..." I hear, watching Saw's hand quivering with every letter she etches.

'Gaty and I can't express how sorry we are. How sorry I am. For I was too full of myself, and the hope I had blinded me from seeing the damage I inflicted upon all of you."

'Especially those of you who died, because of a garden."

'I tried to help, I really did. But after the fight today, I think it'd be best for everyone if I distance myself from the mistakes I have created."

'...So, we have decided that it'd be best for the both of us to leave."

This last sentence has left Saw fighting against the sobs that clawed at her throat. I feel my hand tapping against the thorns in thought, and I keep

my eyes on Gaty, who now sobbed underneath her labored breaths.

"Let's keep going," I say.

'The mistakes that I have made did more damage than I could ever try and fix. While I never meant to hurt anyone, it pains me to realize that the best course of action is for Gaty and I to leave the city, and find our own place elsewhere."

'Believe me. Gaty agreed to this as well- Nearly getting stabbed was enough to ensure her decision on the matter."

Gaty's breaths shatter into sobs at this sentence and I continue.

'We've made so many friends here, and it genuinely hurts me to say goodbye. I struggled to find a way to tell this to everyone in person, but, ultimately, I figured that the best way to do so was through a letter."

'Nobody wants to see me after opening old wounds, anyways."

'Nothing will be coming with us. At the time of writing this, anything you find is yours to keep- for we don't want any bitter reminders of this city to follow us anywhere."

'All we want is a fresh start. A real place to call home."

'And we can't express how sorry we are for everything."

'I hope you all are able to find solace one day."

'-Saw and Gaty"

She finishes her writing just in time, for her wrist gives in, the pencil slipping free from her grip. I ignore the tears that pour down her face, ripping the notebook from her hands and tucking it underneath a blooming group of buttercups.

"Thank you," I smile. "You saved me a lot of trouble there."

Scarlet told me about the time Pin had written a letter. No way was I going to make the same mistake.

Once I put the note aside, I grab Saw's shoulders and shove her deeper into the bush. The thorns now dig deeper into the layers of her flesh, and she wails.

I had endured her little sobfest ever since she set foot in the garden. But now? It was too loud....

Far too loud.

Gripping the trowel, I stomped towards her, forcing her to the ground. Her mouth opened for a scream, until I grabbed her tongue, and swung my trowel straight through it.

The smell of iron sinks in, and blood now coats me once more. I grunt at the realization of having to clean myself up at the river once more, for it'll only make me get back to the clubhouse later.

Thankfully, no screams come from Saw anymore. Besides the sounds of her fading underneath the sea of her own blood, she struggles to breathe, mouthing words I couldn't make out.

In the silence she leaves behind, I capture the weakened cries from Gaty, reminding me of the promise that I had yet to fulfill. I forced Saw's head up, ensuring that she could see my following movements. I grab what I need. Then I go to Gaty.

Pieces of flesh hit the surface of my face as I ripped the pitchfork free from Gaty's chest. She wheezes, shakily trying to get back to her feet, until I force the shovel into her hold.

"W-..What are you.. doing..?!" *asked Gaty, her voice drowning in her own hysteria.* "I-I-"

"Do you really want to get yourselves out of this mess?" I ask, and she nods. "Well then. All you have to do is cut Saw's hands off." I wait for the realization to hit her. "...Once those hands are free, break as much as you can."

"Break..?" *she whispers.*

"Uh-huh. Crush every bone in her body. Come on, I'm going to need one of you as a piece to my garden- I can't just let you both run off. But I'm

willing to let you escape. At least... one of you."

I can tell, just from my words, that Gaty is considering getting Saw out of there. Not caring about her missing tongue. Or her punctured body. Because in that moment, the shovel slips free from her grasp.

That's when I step forward. "Is this really the choice you want to make...?" I ask. She scowls, for a split second, until my presence forces it into a frown.

"..I.. I can't leave her.. Behind.."

"She's bleeding to death, Gaty..."

"I CAN'T DO THAT TO HER!"

"Then you both go. By my hands."

"No, I... S-Saw..."

"Are you sure you want to die here..?"

When I'm met with silence, I look down. I can see the way she clenches the shovel, a gesture serving as a confirmation as I step aside.

"Go on," I chuckle. "Break every bone- and I'll let you go."

Stuttering, Gaty whispers my name. But I don't respond. It's not much, yet I can tell that her mind is set, just from the way she approached the bush.

Saw's wheezing grows in its pace once her lover draws near. Her eyes flutter, seeing Gaty carefully reach for her direction. It's a familiar glimmer that returns to Saw's pupils- a shine of hope- until Gaty manages to grab the blood coated trowel.

The gate wastes no time. She brings the trowel down hard against Saw's wrist. Gushing flesh squishes all around us, but when I see the exposed veins within Saw's wrist, I know she's done for. Despite her pain, I can see the panic that spikes in her, as a gargled wail breaks from the surface of her bloodied throat. The rapid rise and fall of her chest was a sight I captured in the others within the garden, and Gaty continued to wail, slicing through her girlfriend's wrist.

I let her handle the bone. Since the trowel was still in need of sharpening, I smirked as Gaty did everything she could to make the process as painless as possible. It didn't take long for her to grow desperate, glancing at the shovel, and grabbing it from its place on the ground.

Two sickening chops later, and Saw's hands were now mine.

All ours.

Heaving, Gaty drops the shovel from her gritted teeth, and she loses her dinner, as well as the strawberry shortcake that Saw had baked for her earlier. She collapses, retching violently until nothing is left in her stomach.

Humming, I kneel down beside her, patting her back with sympathy. "I promise. I'll let her go," I whisper. "There's just one last step you need to finish.."

"I-I can't.." *Gaty croaked, wincing at the burning pain in her throat.*

"Come on. It can't be that hard to break your girlfriend's bones. You already cut off her hands."

Although I knew what this moment felt like, I can't help but think about the words that race in Gaty's mind. I feel her moving from my side, almost somberly, as she stared down at Saw, tears now trailing down her aching face.

I tilt my head, observing her movements. Here she was. A wailing, shivering mess. I always thought it would be the other way around, but Saw's gargled screams served as a message to Gaty, begging her to do it.

First, her expression remained neutral. Then, a smile, as she reached over, waves of grief coursing through her wooden body.

"..I'm.. I'm going to get you out of here, I promise," *she whispered, placing a kiss on Saw's cheek.* "No matter where I go- or where I end up. Whether I'm in the stars, or in the flowers... I.. I will always find my way back to you..."

Judging from her words, Gaty couldn't afford to wait any longer. Seems like Saw knew it too, but as the wooden gate reached down to grab the

shovel, her head shook from side to side, her eyes bulging from their sockets.

I can tell her mind changed. And when Gaty raised the shovel, my eyes came to a gradual close with an unraveling smile.

CRUNCH.

"I'M SORRY!" *Gaty's muffled words make me giggle.*

CRACK.

"I'M SO SORRY!"

WHAM.

"SAW!"

BANG.

"SAAW!"

Every crack and crunch sounded like a symphony to me. She continued to sob, apologies wafting through the bloodied atmosphere as she swung the shovel into Saw's side. Blood sprayed from her mouth, and the hesitancy died down. I lost count of how many hits it took for her to crumble to the ground.

I noticed Saw's body. Bruises swell and fill with the blood from bursting veins. Broken bones make their presence from the darkening bruises that looked as if they were going to burst, and, after another impact of the spade, it breaks the skin, letting the bone shine from its bleeding surface.

Every swing brings more force. Clenching her teeth, Gaty flinched at the heaving sounds of her dying girlfriend, her blood spitting all over the sides of her face.

I could tell that some managed to get in her mouth. Because she starts gagging as well, and it only makes her beat the poor thing with more force.

When a sickening crunch fills my ears, I smile- for the shovel now plunged

straight through Saw's chest, followed by a scream that Gaty couldn't recognize.

Her own.

'Looks like somebody's gonna have a story to tell when she returns home..~'

"GOLF BALL!"

The sound of Rocky's scream forced the scientist to step out of the experimentation room. Shivering, she approached Rocky's room, where she carefully peeked inside.

Rocky's slumbering expression served as a reassurance. Sighing in relief, she quietly closed the door behind her, soon making the walk back.

When she stepped into the experimentation room once again, Tennis Ball looked towards her.

"How's she holding up?" he asked.

"Better..." she lied, her eyes shifting to the roof. "The peak of- that illness she has, seems to have passed."

The larger sports ball sighed in relief. "Thank goodness.. I'm still not sure what she could have caught- I'm still trying to look into it."

"And did you find anything?"

"No... I'm still looking. Thankfully, it doesn't seem contagious; she's really helping out with Rocky. I think it's keeping her mind off of Grassy's little vacation.."

"And off of Robot Flower, too," Golf Ball replied with a sigh.

As the day came to a close, Tennis Ball helped Golf Ball organize her things, wanting to get a fresh start for the both of them.

Now that things were slowing down in the city, he wanted to ensure the comfort of his dearest lab partner. So much had taken place, and despite their efforts to move on, life in the city had its ways of roping them into the chaos- leaving them running in and out without a passing glance.

Somehow, the attempts of helping from the TLC-er's have worked. The community garden, from what Tennis Ball heard, is now a go-to spot for a majority of the city. Days went by, and the routines he had familiarized himself with in the past, faded back into the present day, reminding him that the nightmare was now over.

A new chapter had begun. And for Tennis Ball, he refused to start it off on the wrong note.

So when he heard Robot Flowers' name, he couldn't stop himself from raising an eyebrow, turning towards his partner with a puzzled look.

"I thought you liked to make fun of her for it?" he asked, resulting in a sigh from the smaller sports ball.

"...Love has the power to change you, TB," she uttered, her head tilting to face the floor. "And the loss that Basketball experienced is something I'm no stranger to."

He knew the topic went beyond his cousin. Just from the way the smaller sports ball acted around him, he made out the pieces, knowing that their relationship was something that wouldn't let her mind rest.

"Golf Ball..." Her name left his mouth in a soft hush. Carefully, he tried to approach her, only to see the way she stepped aside, her glasses capturing the reflection of the lights above them. She utters something unintelligible, and when Tennis Ball's confusion struck through her gaze, she spoke more clearly.

"I'm scared to let myself love you again."

His head tilted to its side. "Why's that?" he asked.

"The last time I did-... well... we ran out of time. I've let everybody down, TB." She spoke through a warbling tone. "What happened is something that will haunt me for the rest of my life. And if I find myself letting you all down again, I..."

She had to stop. Tears threatened to crawl down the corner of her eyes, and she already regretted opening up this much.

There'd be no way in hell she would cry.

But Tennis Ball caught this, and with a reassuring nudge, he spoke. "You won't."

"Hah. And how do you know that?" The smaller scientist chuckled.

"Golf Ball, I will wait until the end of time if that's what it takes. I don't care." Tennis Ball paused, the corners of his mouth lifting into a somber smile. "I'll wait, even beyond this lifetime, if that's what it takes for you to let me love you again."

For a moment, he watched as Golf Ball turned to look at him, her eyes now awake at the world from her partner.

It was when that familiar gloss blanketed over them, when he realized his mistake.

"Oh no- did I.." he mumbled to himself, carefully 'hugging' the smaller sports ball. "Hey... it's okay..."

"It's not." Golf Ball murmured through her own shudders.

"Golfie- you're allowed to cry. I've told you this before, remember...?"

"....That's the thing." The poor scientist sniveled, unable to hold back the sorrow in her voice. "I can't."

"You can't..? GB, what are you-"

"..I've been lying to you. About everything- about that medicine- I refused to make it anyone else's focus but my own, because it's my job to make up for the opportunities that I've lost!"

When the words found their way to his 'ears,' the larger sports ball shook his head, as if he were trying to shake his mind free from any remaining thoughts, in order to understand what his partner was telling him. "Wait- medicine?! Golfball, what do you-"

"That zelatonin hasn't been tested on anyone... besides myself." The truth spews out before Golf Ball can stop it. She could barely muster up the strength to speak- let alone, even look at Tennis Ball, who's disbelief quickly boiled into something unfamiliar.

Rage.

"Golf Ball, what were you THINKING?!" His voice exploded, sending a shiver down Golf Ball's spine.

"I was thinking of the city, Tennis Ball. I'm in charge now. Basketball shouldn't be the only one to-"

Her eyes twitch when his voice overpowers her. "Are you insane?! You, of all people, know the rules of experimentation- what you did is DANGEROUS!"

"Nothing's happened," she mumbled beneath her breath.

"YOU'VE BEEN DOING THIS ALONE," he yelled.

"And?"

"Oh my place where tennis balls are created..."

Blinking, Golf Ball watched as Tennis Ball paced back and forth, something he rarely ever did unless he was stressed.

It didn't click in her mind. She knew what the experimentation life was like. She was a scientist for Putt's sake- and there was no way she'd waste time trying to find any kind of 'test subject' for something that was of her own creation.

She didn't see it as a sign of protecting the others. No. Golf Ball knew that by taking this risk, she'd reach a new barrier of success. One that she had failed to reach before.

Ugh.

She stomped her foot, glaring up through her shining glasses. "Look, it's not that big of a deal-"

"IT IS TO ME!" Tennis Ball shouted, forcing her to shrink from the tone. "Testing out a medication that you've invented is BEYOND dangerous, Golf Ball, especially when you're doing it alone! Why didn't you get me to help?! Or Basketball?! SOMEBODY!"

"I..." She had the answer. She lived by it- she swore she just lived by it.

Then why couldn't she remember..?!

While Golf Ball continued to think, she swore she heard the faint sounds of Rocky's screaming. It drained her of the color from her face, and her lips tightened, silently reassuring herself that it wasn't real.

All the while, Tennis Ball didn't stop pacing. He felt bad enough for snapping at his partner, but what she did was something far too dangerous. Even worse- she was doing it behind his back.

But that's when the realization hits him. Turning, he finds the silent terror that painted over Golf Ball's face, and his fears were on the brink of confirmation.

"Wait. Golf Ball-" he spoke. "Didn't you give bottles out to everybody?"

In that moment, she wished she had the ability to vanish into thin air. She nodded, whispering, "I did."

"These effects- have you observed them over a long-term period?! Or a short term?!"

Rather than a response, Tennis Ball is met with silence.

And the realization of their fatal mistake sinks in.

"...Oh no."

If it weren't for the Yoylelite, Saw would've died long before the final blow.

Gaty dug the shovel all the way through her chest. Her limbs crack with every move she makes, and she now drowns in her own blood, as well as her own pain.

Faint moans and sobs echo from the two. And when Gaty stumbles away from the rose bush, I smile, making my calm approach to the scene.

"I never imagined you'd have the actual strength to do it," I congratulated her, tugging at the shovel in Saw's chest.

"S...Saw.."

I don't turn, but I can hear her sobs. Her snivels. Her weeps of both grief and regret as the weight of what she's done crashes through her.

"Saw I'm so sorry..." *She sobbed out.* "I.. I shouldn't.. oh my fence..."

It's a pain I am all too familiar with. Forcing the shovel free from Saw, I take a quick look, wincing at the damage that was left behind.

"Jeez... every bone of hers is swollen," I whisper. "And you managed to send her heart straight to the ground!"

Another weep, and I sigh.

There wasn't much from Scarlet today. For I had gained my control. The decisions we had once planned together were now in the palm of my hands, and as I gaze down upon the injured Gaty, I realize that there is nothing left to stop me.

Not anymore.

I let my eyes inspect the damage left from my pitchfork. Unlike Grassy,

her object form was a lot bigger, and the punctured woulds gave me a clear view of her own innards. I smirk, my heart fluttering at the way her veins pumped, rapidly flowing endless blood through her panicking body.

It wasn't any neat, either. Her body twitched and writhed, struggling to breathe without the pain searing through her wounds. Staggered breaths, and shuddering cries, I can only watch as her despair brings a handful of memories back into my mind.

I never liked looking back. But now, when I do, I find that it fuels my anger. And I clench the pitchfork, wincing at the splintered wood that nearly digs into my palms.

She only has enough time to turn towards my direction, until I swing the spade against her skull, sending her right to unconsciousness. The blood from her wounds continue to pour like an endless waterfall, painting over the shiny, green hues of the plant stems underneath her.

Usually, I'd find this frustrating. But at least the garden is getting something to drink.

I had gotten caught up between this and my old life to try and catch the little things.

I move Gaty's slumbering body, grabbing her by the ankle and hoisting her into the air. I spend some time searching, wanting to find the perfect spot to dig. I debate on stabbing her through the skull, just to get it over with, but a stray beam of moonlight shimmers down on an empty part of the garden.

That's when I found my digging spot.

Ignoring the choking wheezes from Balloony, I step around Snowball's body, plunging the tip of the shovel into the ground. I dig, and the night goes on, not hesitating to fall into the pained noises that erupted from the planted souls. I make sure the crater I unearth is deep enough, and once it's set, I grab a handful of angel's trumpets, shoving them down Gaty's throat.

It's enough to wake her up. And I smirk, watching as her eyes fluttered open to the sight of darkness, with crumbs of dirt raining all around her.

Panic buzzes through her system, as her legs kick in a frenzy to try and get herself up.

But I bury her alive. And her legs stay sticking up, as I place a few boulders over her body, ensuring her permanence in my garden.

Their final (conscious) breaths perish into the atmosphere. I stare, taking in the sight of the garden once more. Balloony continued to sway ever so gently, and his eyes stayed on Saw, who's mangled body stayed permanently in the thorny bushes.

Gaty, on the other hand, continued to kick at the air, her movements gradually slowing down. Perhaps it was the blood loss that got to her first. Or the mouthful of dirt.

It was really hard to tell nowadays, all thanks to the yoylelite.

This last altercation has given me the chance to get a better glimpse at the stone. The two halves remained in the center, roots now grounding them to their fateful spot. One had more than the other, for I had carried the other half wherever I went.

And tonight, my hand grabbed the stone, shoving it into the satchel I had left behind. My feet lead me down the familiar path, the one that led to the city.

Not knowing what awaited me back in the clubhouse.

Moonlight washed upon Basketball's face as she opened the doors to the lab.

Awoken by the endless knocking, she was surprised that Golf Ball hadn't answered the door. There was no way she'd let Rocky open it at this hour, so she dragged herself from her bed, checking to see who was on the other side.

She didn't want to admit the surprise she felt when Blocky's face came into view. "Blocky..? What are you-"

He lifted his hand in front of her, effectively stopping her words. "Don't ask. I lost my zelatonin- figured I'd come by to get some more."

"...At four in the morning?" she asked.

"What did I just say."

"Sorry, sorry. Here- you can come down, I'm sure GB's got a bottle around here. I just took my dose, but I've got enough to share."

A few steps later, the two found themselves in the main room of the lab. Blocky leaned against the wall with crossed arms, watching as Basketball tiredly looked through the lining cabinets on the wall.

"You'd think, with it being her own invention," the sports ball mumbled. "It'd be so much easier to find."

"Eh. Doesn't surprise me in the slightest," Blocky stated.

"Really?"

"Believe me. I've got years of knowing her under my belt- it sounds like something she would do."

Chuckling, Basketball gave him a glance, continuing to look through a small closet. "..I can only imagine," she responded.

What comes next, though, is enough to make her freeze. "I'm sorry about everything. Y'know- what I said earlier, and all..."

"...You're sorry?" she whispered.

"Don't make me repeat myself. Listen. I know a lot of things are piling up on you- and losing Grassy didn't make it any easier for the both of us." The mention of his name made the scientist wince. "..But I shouldn't have belittled your loss like that."

Shutting the doors to the closet, Basketball found herself turning to face him. She expected to tune out, waiting for that numbness to

catch onto her once more. But it doesn't.

"..I'm only trying my best, here," she spoke. "When- she was around, things felt more organized than I could ever realize."

He frowned. "I see.."

"..Yet, after everything.. I have to try and focus on what I can do now. Whether it's building, or searching. Helping... or even resting." She gestured towards the red boils on her body. "All I can try and do is move forward."

"Do you think we can keep going?" he asked, much to her surprise. Seconds pass, and she gave him a weak smile, placing the box back onto the ground.

"It wouldn't hurt to try."

Reconciliation. She wasn't sure if it was with him, or with the emotions she had finally come to release- whatever it was, her shoulders loosened up as an unspoken weight was lifted from her back. In exchange was a smile so similar, that the sports ball swore she could feel the tensions easing between them.

"Anyways... Do you have any left?"

Well. So much for those few seconds of peace.

Blinking, Basketball sifted through the box, coming across the familiar purple bottle of Golf Ball's creation.

"HELP ME!"

When the scream burst in Basketball's 'ears,' her blood stiffened in fear. She stood still, watching, almost waiting, for it to happen again.

And it does. *"MAMA! HELP ME!! MAMA!!!*"

"GRASSY?!" The bottle slipped from Basketball's hold, her rational vanishing, as she sprinted across the room, ripping through the night to find the voice.

The voice that belonged to Grassy.

"GRASSY?!" she cried out into the sky. "WHERE ARE YOU!?"

Despite the clearing of the environment surrounding her, Basketball no longer catches the haunting screams of her son. Her heart raced, and for a second, a searing pain splits through her skull, as a headache settled into her system.

There was no way that it was real. Nothing could replicate an object's voice in such a way- especially with that kind of terror. So how did she...

...

When the purple bottle flashes in her mind, Blocky zips towards her direction, finding her in a dazed stupor. "Basketball?!"

"I-..oh my court, I'm so sorry..." she wheezed.

"What the hell was that- you just- did you hear something outside?!"

"No, i-it's nothing," Basketball stuttered, unable to comfort herself with her words.

Now, Blocky hesitated on trying to comfort the sportsball. His hand twitched, slowly reaching to rest on the sides of her 'shoulder,' until a familiar scream pierced through his skull. This time, only he could hear it.

"BLOCKY!"

"Snowball...?" His cubed heart sinks to the soles of his feet. Basketball noted the way his demeanor shifted, immediately sensing what he was experiencing.

"Blocky," she warned. "What are you-"

"GET ME OUT OF HERE BLOCKY!"

It was Blocky's turn to run. As the color drained from his face, he started to stumble down the street, his head snapping left and right to

try and find Snowball. He screamed, yelling to try and get a clue as to where he was.

But nobody responded.

Quickly, Basketball caught up to his pace, yanking him back. "NO BLOCKY!" she shouted. "IT'S NOT SNOWBALL!"

"BUT HE'S RIGHT THERE! HE NEEDS ME! SNOWBALL!!"

"*DAAD!!*"

Grassy.

Grassy's voice instantly brought tears to his eyes. And despite Basketball's efforts, the screams return to her, too.

She forced Blocky's head to face hers. "THE ZELATONIN!" she shouted over the screams. "IT'S THE ZELATONIN!"

"HOW?!" Blocky wept.

"I-IT- OH PUMP, IT HAS TO-"

"MAMA! PAPA!"

"BLOCKY!"

"HELP!!"

The screams of voices old and new shatter the peace of the slumbering city.

From those who lost someone...

"BALLOONY, WHERE ARE YOU?!"

More recently..

*"*BARF BAG!?"

To the first...

"TREE?! TREE, I'LL SAVE YOU!"

And from the memories..

*"*PEN! I CAN'T LEAVE HIM BEHIND!"

Of the fire.

*"*LOLLIPOP*!"*

With the zelatonin integrated into everybody's system, that six percent had finally caught up to them. From hearing the frightened voices of their loved ones, to being trapped in nightmares that puppetered their slumbering bodies, the night spiraled into something utterly horrifying.

"OK FIREY! GIVE ME YOUR HAND!" the voice sneered, causing Firey to sprint down the hallway that stretched farther and farther away from him. "*GIVE ME YOUR HAND!*"

"NO!" he wailed. "LEAVE ME ALONE!"

"I GOT YOU!"

"PLEASE! NO, I-I CAN'T! I CAN'T GO BACK!"

"DO IT."

He noticed her trembling.

"DO IT NOW!"

Weapon- he needed a WEAPON-

"NOW!"

"NOOOOOO!"

Due to the zelatonin, he felt the world plunging from the very top of the Yoyle Needy, sending him into a frenzied panic. But beyond his night terror, he pressed the knife against Leafy's chest, mere seconds away from stabbing right through it.

Shouting, Leafy regained her strength from her slumber, forcefully shoving her lover off. This didn't stop him, as his terrorized gaze was fixed onto her, immediately aiming his knife in her direction. She had to scream his name, once, twice, until his pupils dilated, and the knife slipped out of his trembling hands.

Her screams combine with those nearby.

"FIREY! NO! PUT THE KNIFE DOWN!"

"NO! GET YOUR HANDS OFF ME! I CAN'T- BREATHE! HELP! HELP!!"

"I'M SORRY! DON'T CUT BOMBY'S HANDS OFF! PLEASE!"

"MY EYE! SHE STABBED MY EYE! HELP ME!"

"NO NO NO- NOT THE FIRE! PLEASE! NOT THE FIRE! PENCIL!!!"

"BUBBLE, HELP ME!"

Fanny's screams petrified Bubble- for they weren't out of malice or anger. But instead, out of pure fear.

"BUBBLE!!"

"FANNY?!" she stumbled, becoming the frantic fool whose ears have been deceived. "FANNY! FANNY, WHERE ARE YOU?!"

"HELP!!"

She's trapped in the web of panic and unreachable by any means. Leaping from her bed, Bubble ignored the exhaustion that tugged at her mind, as she sprinted through the melting hallways of the clubhouse. She screamed out for Fanny, worriedly trying to locate her in the ever growing void.

"OI'M HERE FANNY!" she shouted. "OI-"

"HELP ME!!"

No- was that- Pencil...?

"BUBBLE!!"

Match..

"SAVE US!"

Ruby..

"GET US OUT OF HERE!!"

Ice Cube..!

One by one, the voices of her alliance members constricted around her. She had to turn back. They were behind her-

"PENCIL?! FANNY!? GUYS?!"

"BUBBLE! SAVE US!"

Now they were next to her.

"GUYS!"

Her hand clasped onto something. She had to defend them. Protect them.

"FANNY, WHERE ARE YOU?!"

She ran.

"SHE GOT ME!"

"FANNY!"

And ran.

"BUBBLE!"

Finally, the angered tone made its way into Bubble's 'ears.' Her eyes blink, and her room fades back into her line of sight, with Fanny's eyes staring back at her angrily.

Wait-

Angrily...?

"F-Foinny...?"

Bubble found her girlfriend standing defensively, her plug tail curled in between her legs. Her head, despite her neck being bandaged, was tilted upwards, refusing to let herself back away from the situation.

She can see just how terrified Fanny was- despite her stern expression, her body quivered underneath the breaths she took. And that's when Bubble notices the knife in her hands, its tip aimed directly at the center of her girlfriend's face.

Horrified, the metallic object stepped back, her hands lowering from their defensive pose.

When the knife cleared from her vision, Fanny's trembling ceased. Her creased eyebrows stayed fixed, and her eyes narrowed, as she mentally sorted through the things she could possibly tell her.

There had to be something. Bubble aimed a knife at her; she was moments away from stabbing her.

Fanny HATED stabbing. She HATED death, she hated this feeling of fear.

If this was the case, why couldn't she say anything?!

Once the moment passes, Bubble tossed the knife aside. She retreated into the corner of the room, her breaths quickening as the claws of regret strangled her windpipes.

This would have gone on for longer, and Fanny stood moments away to approach her, but Bracelety's screaming forced them both to look.

"NO! NOOO!"

"BRACELETY! WAKE UP!"

"ICY! MY ICY!!"

"Bracelety..!!" Fanny whispered, scrambling out of the room.

Leaving Bubble alone.

Alone.

Here came the rapid thumping of her heart.

Shivering like a leaf, the metallic soap bubble hauled herself up from the ground. She stood in silence, letting her mind dissipate into the static-like atmosphere.

And that's when Ruby's scream made her jump.

"RUBY, STOP!" Flower pleaded at the top of her lungs, trying to hold the gemstone down. "YOU'RE NOT AWAKE!"

Any words of comfort fall on deafened ears. Ruby, now trapped in a night terror, thrashed at the center of the bed that she shared, sheets flying off of the mattress.

Flower jumped to avoid a kick to the face, and Book stepped in, her hands slapping over her girlfriends shoulders with a firm grip.

"It's NOT real, Ruby!" she yelled. "It's a nightmare, you're having A NIGHTMARE!"

Ruby's limbs flung in a heaped panic, tears pouring down her scarred face as she screamed at the top of her lungs. "PLEASE! FLOWER! FLOWER!!!"

"RUBY, LOOK! LOOK AT ME!" Flower cried, worriedly grasping at the sides of her girlfriend's face. "I'M OKAY!"

"NOOOOO!"

It's no effort to avoid getting a hit to the face, even though the gemstone's movements are fast, her limbs snapping as she clawed at dead air. Book and Flower exchange a quick nod, and soon, the bloom held her lover back, with Book desperately trying to reel her back from her nightmare.

"SHE'S RIGHT HERE RUBY!" she assured her. "LOOK!"

"SHE'S DEAD! I-I LOST HER! I LOST MY FLOWER!"

"NO! SHE'S HERE RUBY! WAKE-"

That's when she hears whispering. Frantic, sinister whispering. And then the begging. The wailing. Excuses upon excuses. For Book, Ice Cube and Bubble's voices constrict around her mind, and they poison her with the terror she felt on that fateful day.

The day where they gave her up.

Everything around her melted into a blurry atmosphere, and the memories struck at Book, sending needles of terror straight through her spine. She tried recalling the grounding techniques that her girlfriends had introduced her to, but when nothing worked, her hands flew to the sides of her own head.

And she screamed.

Her throat burned, for she doesn't know how long she screamed for. It wasn't until she felt her body rocking back and forth, that a familiar voice faded back into her 'ears.'

"Book, we're here! We promise!"

"Look! BOOK! BOOK!"

"G..Guys...?"

For a moment, the world painted its presence back into Book's vision. Her girlfriends' faces sketched into existence, and with shaking hands, she reached for their figures, unable to ground herself without some sort of confirmation.

They were here.

They were real.

This wasn't a dream. No- they were real, and she deserved this.

She deserved to be happy.

..Did she..?

All she did was *mope*.

Cry.

Bring misery to those around her.

No, no, it isn't-

All you are is a burden.

To them.

Think about it- how happy they would have been if you were out of the picture.

Their feelings are fake.

All of this is fake.

You're nothing.

Nothing.

And you deserve to-

"BOOK!"

The voice, now audible, made something inside of Book snap.

She was tired. Exhausted by the thoughts that prevented her from living in the moment.

So she screamed. "FUCK YOU!!"
One hard swing, and Book's fist plummeted into Bubble's metallic forehead, swiftly knocking her to the ground.

Wait- Bubble...?

"BUBBLE!" Ruby's cry forced Book to step away from the group. Her

back pressed tightly against the frigid walls of their room, and her eyes adjusted, revealing the nightmare she had now returned to.

Bubble had tried to help the guidebook ground herself. She rushed into the room to check on Ruby, and in the Knick of time, she was able to get her back to the present.

Until Book knocked her to the ground.

At that moment, the rest of the Freesmarters barged into the room. Confusion merged into panic and anger, as Match, Ruby and Fanny tried to help Bubble up.

The rest stared at Book in disbelief.

"WAS THAT NECESSARY?!" Ice Cube shouted, a dark blue hue forming at the center of her face. "WHY DID YOU DO THAT?!"

Book's words swelled at the center of her throat. Stuttering, she tried to defend herself, hesitantly raising her hands. "I-I- SHE-"

"Guys, she's not WAKING UP-" Fanny yelled, her tail whipping violently from the stress. "SHE'S NOT WAKING UP!"

"BUBBLE?!"

"BUBBLE!"

"BUBBLE!"

As the worried voices of her teammates swelled into the atmosphere, something inside of Book snapped. She sobbed, watching Bracelety and Pencil drag Bubble away to safety. Droplets of blood are left smeared on the floor, leading a little trail to the other room where she'd be treated.

The stiffness in her body then blazes with terror, and Book sprints out of the clubhouse. Away from her girlfriends who cried out for her, away from the friends who had betrayed her. She cut through endless paths, turning at every corner and running across the gravel-coated path that led straight to a familiar river.

Something strained her vision. The colors of the sky melted into a lighter blue, and daybreak threatened to uncover her tracks.

She didn't have a chance to see what time it was. Nor could she tell how long she stayed there for; with nobody chasing after her, all that was left were the serene sounds of the rippling waves, taking in the water that stretched around her.

Minutes turn into hours. And the sun is back in the sky. She could only fall into the accursed grip of her damning thoughts.

In the mere seconds that it takes for the guidebook to lay back, she noticed the metallic soap bubble that approached her in the distance.

And their eyes lock.

Two.

'Yet there could only be one.'

---

days until graduation: 2

HI this is hectic. This is SO HECTIC

I graduate in two days. After that I am sleeping for a good week or so.

Anyways, tomorrow's chapter is going to be confusing. IT IS INTENDED TO BE CONFUSING, SO DON'T BRING IT UP. Please.

Imagine writing over 7k words everyday in a week. Couldn't be me (it is)

AND THATS ENOUGH OF MY YAPPING ok bye!!!!

-ice

Look at the Sky

DISCLAIMER: THIS CHAPTER IS MEANT TO BE CONFUSING. I KNOW IT'S CONFUSING. I KNOW IT'S NOTHING BUT DIALOGUE. THAT IS THE POINT! ALRIGHT, ENJOY YOUR DECIPHERING!

-

"Hoi.."

Bubble's voice struck like a knife to the chest. With clenched fists, Book swallowed the guilt that swelled in her chest, giving her a slow nod. "Hey.."

"You come boiy the lake too..?" Bubble whispered, waving her hands. "I loive this place.."

"I.. I could hear it from the trail nearby.. figured I'd calm down if I stayed for a bit.."

"That's.. noice.."

Silence. Even as Bubble's gaze carefully floated to the shimmering surface of the Yoyle River, she could still feel Book's eyes staring through her metallic body.

"...."

"Mind if I... sit here?"

"Go right ahead."

Shuffling. Then silence. At least, in between the two- for the gentle churning of the river lulled its way through the air around them. Both stared into the endless body of water, getting lost in its path as it stretched endlessly around them.

Despite their rushed exits, both noticed the small satchels that they each carried. One had it on the side, and the other's was slung over her shoulder. It was nothing new, for they set out to get whatever supplies they needed for their respective team.

One retrieved ingredients. The other carried food.

One picked up snacks. The other picked up supplies.

One, carried the emotional turmoil from the present and the past. And the other carried the brutalizing reminder of time's continuous loop.
Their silence continued, neither one uttering a single sentence. No sounds of nature constructed around them, with the noticeable absence of any fauna that traveled through.

Until one of them spoke.

"How's your head..?"

She turned. "..It's foeeling a little better.. it still hurts.."

The other flinched. "Look, I'm-"

"You don't hoive to be."

"Bubble, I-I knocked you out! I can't just-"

"No. You shouldn't be apologizing."

Why shouldn't she? The poor woman flinched at the other's dead tone. The bruise on the center of her face proved to be nothing short of painful; she couldn't leave her without owning up for her mistake.

Owning up for her own mistakes.

Yet again.

...

"Are you okay..?"

"..Why are you even here."

"Wh- everyone was worried about you.. they're all still looking- you ran out of there suddenly, from what everyone was telling me..."

"That's because I hurt you," she whispered, her fist clenching the grass below. "I left a mark on you, Bubble."

"It wasn't on purpose.."

"Still."

The other woman frowned. Seeing as she wouldn't bother to listen, she looked away. "..If this is about what we did- what I did- then.. I-.. I'm sorry."

"..What."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what I did. I... I shouldn't have believed her- I got you killed, all because of a lie she had told us. I was just .."

"..You were just what, now?"

"I was just SCARED?"

"Over what. Losing someone you knew for TWO MONTHS?!"

"Hey-"

"I WAS MURDERED, BUBBLE! YOU AND ICE CUBE BOTH MURDERED ME AND THREW OUR FRIENDSHIP AWAY- AS IF IT WAS NOTHING?!"

"I-"

"I WAS FINISHING THE RECOVERY CENTER! I TRIED TO GET US CLOSER TO STOPPING HER, TO BRINGING EVERYONE WE LOST BACK!"

"I-I'm so-"

"INSTEAD, YOU BOTH CAVED IN AND THREW ME ASIDE, AS IF I WERE GARBAGE! IS THAT ALL YOU SEE ME AS?!" Her throat burned from her screaming, but she didn't care. Nothing could

encapsulate the betrayal that seethed in the center of her chest.

Shivering, she sunk to the ground, her arms wrapping around herself pathetically. "..Did I really mean that little to you guys..?"

"No.. No, y-you didn't," the other spoke through her tears. "We loved you so much- w-we still do-"

"I still have nightmares from that day.. the way you grabbed me.. the words you said.."

"Please-"

"Come on.. remember..? Remember when you told me how I spent all that time, going insane.. talking nonsense.."

"I-"

"Not listening... or doing anything."

"I'M SORRY!"

"And then you waved that knife at my face.. telling me that you had to do it.." She laughed through her own tears. "I thought I would have forgotten that by now, really... but these nightmares... they happen so often, that I relive it.. every, single, night."

Sobs. Her head turned to see the other, burying her face into her scarred palms, her tears pouring down endlessly over her metallic cheeks. She might have been surprised, but what could she say.

She had endured too much. And even when she finally found some sense of normalcy...

"...I feel.. empty."

"What...?"

"Ever since our recovery.. I've felt so empty. I knew that things would never be the same again. But it still hurt, so, so much."

The other sat up. "..I know."

"You do, don't you.."

"Yes," she uttered, her fingers jabbed into the center of her own palms. "Every single part of me ached that day. Even before I opened my eyes, I still felt everything."

"Hah. Good one."

"It's the TRUTH!"

"Ugh, you are driving me CRAZY. It's one thing to say that someone like YOU felt anything- but to try and tell me that you felt WORSE than me?!"

"I'm not saying that."

"YOU ARE!"

"LISTEN TO YOURSELF!" Her voice swelled with frustration. "YOU AND I WENT THROUGH ENOUGH- I DON'T WANT TO MAKE THIS SOME SORT OF COMPETITION!"

"You already have."

"WHAT?!"

"All we have ever done is compete. Battle for a prize that may not have even existed. Sure, Freesmart served as a way to get us closer as something other than teammates- but you and I? We're contestants. Competitors. Forever, and always."

"..Please tell me you aren't bringing the games into this."

"Is that a problem?" the other asked, her eyes narrowing.

"Yes. You trying to make this seem like a 'challenge' won't help you or me get any better."

"I'm not helping you get any better."

"But I want to help you."

That's when her demeanor shifted. Her hand twitched at the sight,

wanting to reach over and, at least, offer some sort of wordless consolation. But her pain cemented her body, and she looked away.

"..Why do you want to help so much."

"I care about you- I.. care about everyone."

"But you didn't even know the others when they died-"

"I may not have, but I still cared. I still wanted there to be someone who cared for them, someone to be there, and offer some sort of help."

"But you-"

"When everything happened.. I wanted to respect everyone who died. Everyone who got hurt because of her- there might not have been any graves, but I spent a lot of time alone, trying to speak to them."

"Speak to them?"

"It's silly, I know. But I just stayed on my own, and silently hoped that they were doing okay. Finding peace on the other side. Never feeling the pain or fear that they must have felt."

"..I.."

"I didn't care who it was. Because nobody deserved it. Nobody." She looked down. "..And I can't tell you how sorry I am for what I did to you."

Silence.

"..I spoke to you too, you know."

"Huh..?"

"After- you died.. I spoke to you.. apologized.. so, many, times... but I hoped that the stars could listen... and grant you everything you could have ever wanted.. I know it was far too late- but I just wanted you to be okay.."

"..When have we ever been okay."

Silence, once again.

"I hate my scars."

"..I hate mine, too."

"Do you think they'll ever go away..?"

"Scars fade. With time, of course. I'm.." She hesitated, trying to make herself feel a little better. "I'm sure that they'll vanish, as time goes along."

"I see..."

"Could I ask you something..?"

"Sure.."

"What was it like..? How did it feel- to officially be a part of Freesmart.."

Her eyes gazed towards the water. "..It was nice.."

"Really?"

"Used to be.. I miss the way we used to be."

"Exploring the city together... doing our errands together.. heh, our yoylecake nights.."

"I definitely miss those.."

"..I wish I could still be a part of that."

"You-"

"It was so new- something I never had a chance to experience. But now.. I want to be a part of something. Not-.. something that everybody associates me with- I want to have a chance at making my own mark, following my own destiny."

"You are though-"

"I'm not. I don't want to be a follower anymore. I'm more than that. I..." She paused. "I hope I'm more than that."

"Who said you were ever a follower?"

"Everyone did. Even when I stood right next to them."

"..You're special. They really do care about you- I've seen the way they've treated you."

"Doesn't mean you saw what took place behind closed doors."

"Seriously? You had it ALL!"

"I did."

"Aren't you at least thankful?!"

"I... I don't know. Just because things were good, didn't mean that things were perfect. You just don't see it." She drew in a long breath. "...Just like how you assumed I didn't see your pain."

"..I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-"

"You assumed."

"I didn't want to. I just... I don't get it. I was treated like dirt too."

"...Looks like we've both been played for fools."

The sound of the waves lulled the tensions in between the two. Seconds passed, and no word trailed from their lips, their bodies soaking up the sunlight that washed upon them.

That's when one of them looked down. "I don't deserve love."

"What..?"

"You heard me."

"You have it all... wha... why are you..."

"I always thought that this was something that would make me happy. Ever since we all met, I clung to you, believing that my happiness was based on our team- and our successions. I worked tirelessly, trying to make sure I didn't mess a single thing up. But no matter what I did.. I.."

Her words trailed off, and that's when the other woman spoke. "You did enough.."

"Clearly, I haven't. Even when we moved to the city- I haven't been able to do enough. Not even for them..."

"What she did wasn't our fault."

"It feels like it is."

"She was just-.... Gosh, I can't even say it. I don't know- I just... can't believe someone like her would have gone out to do this. To us. Her friends."

"She really got us good, did she..?"

"I wish she didn't. I wish she didn't get me.."

"Hey," she began. "I was a victim of hers too, y'know..."

"And do you think anybody treated me like one."

"They did!"

"No, they didn't. When I came back, their concerns never went to my pain. Never to the troubles that I have to face, day after day. No- all they saw was.." Before she could finish, the tears crawled down her face, and she hugged her knees close to her chest.

A gesture that made the other woman frown. Silently, she rubbed her arms, shivering from the pains that reverberated as ghosts through her body.

"...I'm hurting," she whispered.

"Trust me- I'm used to that pain."

"Aren't we both?"

"..."

"..Saw and Gaty left, you know."

"No they didn't. We saw them yesterday- they were hurt, at least, Saw was hurt... Lollipop and Taco brought them home. I meant to check up on them, but I got caught up with-"

"They're gone."

"..What..?"

"They're gone. Apparently, they left- didn't want to face the consequences of making their own garden, I guess..."

"Don't say that! They didn't mean to do any harm- it was like they said, they only wanted to help!"

"And did they..?"

"YES! We both saw how everyone was beginning to move on! People were HEALING! After EVERYTHING!"

"Not sure if what happened yesterday would be enough to prove that.."

With the mention of the two, her hands trembled. She had seen their efforts in helping the others around them, and she couldn't have been more grateful for their efforts. Although her own time was short, due to the alliance, as well as the plagues of her own mind, she managed to check in on them, spending a day's moment to get to know them more.

Now, they are gone. And she was here.

Was this her fault? Her efforts at being a friend- was it.. Not enough for them..?

"..I should have been there for them more."

"You knew them?"

"I was lucky enough to. You didn't see it much- but when I went out, I visited a few people. Saw and Gaty were one of them."

"Oh.. who else did you-"

"I remember seeing him again.. Both of them- heh, it really brought me back.. But then I made the mistake of offering a sleeping mask to them."

"A sleeping mask..?"

"I had brought some for all of us. Yet, when his eyes were covered.. Something snapped. He was laughing at first.. A-and I thought we were finally going to sleep- but that's when he started panicking... 'no, no, what are you doing?! Why are you doing this?!'.. That's when they both decided to pack up and leave... gone."

The other woman listened, frowning as she continued. "...Looks like.. I'm alone again. I thought it wouldn't hurt this time- I told myself that it would happen again, trying to prepare myself so it wouldn't be as painful as it was when I returned. But it was. Dare I say- it was so much worse."

"I'm sure you didn't-"

"Whenever I try to open myself up to everyone, I hope to find some sort of connection. Instead, it creates more of a strain. They immediately see me as something else; not who I wish to be, but something I was never really able to control."

It immediately clicked in the other woman's mind. She tried to offer any form of consolement, but her efforts were halted as the other continued.

"Is this really all I'm meant to be? Am I supposed to be seen as this kind of monster? A person who hurts?" She took a shaky breath. "Is there nobody who will ever see me as somebody...?"
That's when the other woman took her chance to speak. "You're worth more than what other people think-"

"I'm not. You know it personally."

"There's someone out there who sees you. Someone who understands."

"...I haven't spoken to them in days because of this.."

"They really miss you."

"They don't.."

"I've seen them. They talk about you- they never meant to-"

"If they never meant to, they could have said that to my face," she gritted through her teeth, her anger now flaring.

"..I understand.."

"You really don't. Your kindness- it's.. It's all a lie."

"Wh-"

"Don't act so sweetly with me. All you've done is lie. I can see it- I can see right through you."

"I just-"

"I know it's happening again."

"..What..?"

"It's happening again. And you know it. I know it too- I can see her."

"S-See who?!"

"You know who. It's why you're here, after all. You're here to kill me."

"N-NO! No, I made a promise! I swore, I'd never-"

"You could have just killed me. Hit me over the head. You and I both know, it was what you wanted after all."

"..."

"Everything we spoke about..-"

"..."

"...I mean nothing to you.. don't I.."

"..."

"Our pain is so similar..."

"But our stories will end differently."

"Hey... what are you-"

"I can't do this anymore. You...You were right."

"Oh I was.. wasn't I."

'Looks like she caught onto you!~'

The voice. That damned voice. The woman's heart sank, shattering into pieces that scattered across the river's shore. She didn't expect her to make her presence known- especially at a time like now.

But the other's eyes narrowed, her teeth gritting as her eyes shot daggers towards the woman sitting beside her.

"...Huh," she uttered under her breath. "And just when I thought we were getting along.."

'Right along dear! My- you've truly come a long way...'

"I wish I hadn't."

"H-Hey-"

'Such a shame, too.. For you would have made a fantastic vessel."

"W-Wait- what?!"

"Oh, don't act so shocked. She must have told you."

"She didn't- S-Scarl-"

'It's the truth, dear! Before everything fell into place- I had considered taking her under my wing. How couldn't I? She had every reason to inflict the pain that she had received- I could only imagine what she would have done to YOU, especially after that reveal!~'

"..I didn't want to experience that."

'FACE IT. You have always wanted this- to get your vengeance on those who have wronged you. We took a little peek into that colorful mind of yours- it was your dream, ever since you realized the wrongdoings of those around you..~'

"N-No- She isn't like that. She's hurting! I know it- but she'd never-"

"..It's always the same... always.. I'm seen.. As something I'm not.."

'..I'm so sorry it had to be this way, dear. It was a hard choice. But this one here.. Why.. her rage has yet to be seen. So much anger.. So much pain... all serving a garden that will bring me to my justice.'

"..Then why? Why did you cower out of it, huh? Why not me?"

'..Your heart.'

"What about it."

'Your heart is what makes you weak.'

Both women stared at one another, silence condemning them as the voice spoke.

'Your brain, although insightful, is just not strong enough to take this on. You had everything- your physical strength is incredible; your fortitude disturbed everyone... even me. But you and your brain are nothing short of pathetic. And the best way I can express that is simply by looking at the people around you~'

The people around them? The woman frowned, watching as her friend's eyes dulled with every word that they heard.

'You fall for those who walk all over you. You cater to those who refuse to see you in any light, let alone a good one. You do so much for people, you

would move mountains for them... for your friends... for anyone who has won your heart over... yet here they are, never even having you in their consideration.'

"No, that isn't-"

'You will forever be a second choice. An afterthought. Always sought out for, but never loved. Always sought out for guidance and comforting words, but who is there for you?'

"THAT ISN'T TRUE! She was NEVER a second choice- we loved her, not as a teammate- but as a cherished friend! Don't LISTEN TO HER-"

"I-I'm.. My own person.. I don't need anyone to complete me. Nobody walks over me-"

'Really? Come on dear- say something. You know what it's like..~'

"..Trust me. You get used to feeling like a doormat."

Silence.

'You know they all hate you.'

"We don't."

"..Who.. are you, anymore..."

"A nobody. I know."

"Then what am I..?"

Her heart ached, wanting to express the gratitude she had for this woman- until her tongue spoke words, foreign to them, and to her.

She blinks. And then Scarlet speaks.

"...You are someone I regret meeting, with every fiber of my being."

NO! The woman shook her head. That wasn't her, no, it wasn't her words- but whatever fortitude her friend has, was now gone. She stared, tears flooding those familiar eyes of hers, as she admitted defeat.

"..Nobody ever cared about me."

'That's right..'

"Everybody just.. Lied to me.. It's always lying.."

'Accept it..'

"..Finish me off."

"What..?"

"Just- do it. I have nothing."

"No.. No, it's just- she's lying to you. It's all she ever does- I want to get you out of here, I-"

'Oh..? Did she say she wanted to die..?'

"NO-"

"I did."

'Huh! It's your lucky day, darling- I'd be so happy to help you with that!~'

She finds herself standing from her seated position. She speaks, despite my tears,

'I know you've struggled with finding your place.. Wanting to feel seen- feel.. Loved.. I can bring you into a community- somewhere where you can finally belong..'

"No- no, don't-"

"..."

'You will belong in one of my creations, where you will never be alone. All of these thoughts, this anger, this sadness.... If you come with me, it will all go away..'

"You promise..?"

"RUN!"

'I promise..'

"JUST- RUN!"

.....

"No."

'What.'

"I'm not letting you do it. If I go- I'm going by my own hands."

'Like a coward..? HAH! I knew you were pathetic~'

"No- No, you don't-"

"Get AWAY from me!"

"STOP!"

"Hey- put me DOWN!"

"OW!"

"LET GO!!"

Punching.

Screaming.

Clawing.

Kicking.

Both of their bodies, tumbling against the grassy fields of the river.

One bites onto the other's arm. It sends her into a frenzy.

But the other kicks her in the center of her abdomen. It forces the remaining breaths from her system.

They continue, not stopping, even when the thick, crimson liquid splashes from their open wounds. It wasn't until the woman pinned

the other to the ground, her mouth now curved into a scornful scowl.

"I'M NOT-" She grunted, pinning the other down with incredulous effort. "-LETTING YOU DO THIS AGAIN!"

"I HAVE TO!" the other screamed.

Hearing this, the woman then grabbed her by the chest, immediately pinning her down by leaping on top of her. All of her efforts went straight to her arm, which pressed forcefully against the others 'neck,' in hopes of strangling her.

Desperate hacks and wheezes filled the atmosphere, and as her eyes shot left and right, she noticed a jagged rock that laid hidden beneath the blades of grass.

"I ALWAYS THOUGHT YOU WERE A FRIEND," the other woman screamed, not noticing her efforts to try and grab at the rock. "I BELIEVED THAT YOU WERE EVEN BETTER THAN HER!"

Her eyes began to flicker, and the world was beginning to seep into darkness. No, no she had to grab it- she-

"BUT I'M NOT GOING TO LET YOU HURT MY FRIENDS EVER AGAIN!!"

With a roar, the woman beneath her forcefully lunged her head forwards, slamming it right into the 'nose' of the other. This sent the other woman right onto her back, knocking the air out of her as she hissed at the pain that seared through her 'nose'.

Now freed, she wasted no time grabbing the rock, letting the world tune back into her view as she caught her breath.

That's when she heard the other woman, grunting and lifting herself from the ground.

"Y-You.." she gasped, blood gushing down her 'nose.' "You.. don't deserve.. a happy 'ending'.."

Her fist clenched the rock.

"A-And I'm doing this.. s-so you'd.. NEVER have to... so you can live with no guilt..."

Her heart screamed with rage as she heard the other woman.

"I-I never wanted to die... I didn't... I'm.. f-finally happy... But this... this is what life had for me.. I... I couldn't take it... I can't take it anymore.."

"I'M SORRY!" the woman screamed, whirling around and driving the rock against her throat. "I'M SORRY!"

The other gagged. But her bloodied mouth forced itself into a smile. "D-DO IT-"

WHAM.

"PLEASE, DO IT."

BAM.

"FREE ME!"

SLASH.

"I-I CAN'T TAKE IT ANY-"

CRUNCH.

No.

The woman's heart sank.

No.

Blood now coated over her, once more.

No.

But this time.. it was the blood of her dearest friend.

Her hands trembled, hovering over the rock that was now jammed into the other woman's throat. Fragments of her windpipe burst over

the jagged edges, twitching as she struggled to take a proper breath.

Straight in the windpipe.

'Aww.. better luck next time~'

"No," the woman cried, frantically scooping her into her arms. "No no no- I-.. please.."

The other woman struggled. Her mouth, agape, tried to form the words that faded in the back of her mind. In between gargles and gags, the woman holding her could see the blood that flooded in the back of her throat.

Until she managed to speak.

"P-Ple..ase.." she gagged. "Don't.. h-hurt.. the..em.."

"I won't, I-"

"D-Don't.. Hurt.. o-ou..r... frie..nds..."

Her plea. Something that shook the woman to her very core.

She wished she could have agreed. To offer some sort of solace to her dying friend.

But she failed. And it was seen, while she cradled her in her arms. She didn't want to leave her drowning this way. No, she had to help.

How..

A smile then grew on the woman's face, and she lifted her nearly-decapitated head with ease, helping her look at the sky. Her friends' confused whimpers were muffled by the rock, and the woman hushed her, lulling her with a caress on her forehead.

"The sky," she whispered. "Focus on the sky..!"

"G-Ghhk.."

"Look.. it's pretty, right..?"

"It's.. haha.. its.. peace..ful..."

"The colors... just let yourself look at the colors..."

"..Am I.. Home..?"

The woman swallowed back a sob at the other's words. "You're home.." she whispers.

She watched, as her mouth weakly lifted into a smile. Pain. Happiness. Relief..?

"..I'm.. h-..h*ome*.."And those were the last words she could muster. For her eyes gazed into the heavens above, and they stayed, drifting with the clouds that stretched across the sky.

All I could do was hold her. Cradle her. Even as she stopped, I continued to talk to her, whispering easing comforts, and reminding her that she is loved.

Forever will be.

I should be relieved. Thrilled, even. But she was my friend.

My friend.

The grin stayed on my face, but my tears said more than enough.

We both died together, today. Our friendship.. Perhaps it could last forever. Scarlet promised me.

And I promised her.

No matter what- she was loved. She would forever remain loved- even beyond this lifetime.

"I promise," I cry. "I'll never let you feel alone again..."

Shaking, I carefully scoop her body into my arms, and I carry her away.

She's finally resting.

Home.

---

tomorrow's graduation day...

not much to say. life is in the way, so much has taken place! and with tomorrow being my academic sendoff... as well as the vessel reveal.. eesh... we are sprinting back and forth!

and I can say it now: the vessel is either book or bubble. again. tomorrow we figure out who's behind it all.

I am nervous!! Super nervous. I hope that fear garden 2 has been good- and I especially hope fear garden week has been fun :]

but! I gotta head out. celebratory dinner day!

bye guys. have fun theorizing!

-ice

Can You See Me Now?

"Book?!"

The sound of Ruby's voice permeates through the clubhouse. What should have been a peaceful morning, has taken a nosedive into unbridled chaos.

Zelatonin-induced nightmares plagued the city the previous night, and as a result, hallucinations haunted the minds of both old and new faces alike. The screams of their loved ones prevented them from a good night's rest.

Needless to say, Ruby was one of the affected. Memories of that dreadful day rewound like a broken record, with Flower's dying body reappearing into view.

But as quickly as it started, it came to an end. Abrupt, too. All it took was a few good blinks, and the next thing she knew, Ruby was staring at the unconscious body of one of her teammates.

Could she even call Bubble a teammate anymore? After discovering what she did to Book all those months ago, Ruby grew quite discomforted by the soap bubble's presence.

Well- she was told to. Pencil and Match did get really angry when they found o-

No no- that shouldn't matter now. Book ran out hours ago- and she hasn't returned home.

"Book?? Are you home?!" Ruby called, worriedly making her way through the hall. One faint shuffle, and Flower's head poked from the doorframe, shaking her head ever so slightly.

"She isn't here," she said. "I haven't found her anywhere next door- a-

and I don't think she came back after yesterday..!"

Although Ruby was familiarized with this kind of scenario, she couldn't succumb to the fear. How could she? It wouldn't help her in any effort she'd try and make- if anything was going to get done, Ruby had to proceed with tranquility.

"Okay." The gemstone walked over, taking her lover's hand. "W-We-we just have to look around. Maybe she went off for a walk?"

"That could be the case," Flower reassured her. "She loved taking walks- don't you remember?"

"Yeah, but she's been gone all NIGHT! How are we-"

"Where's Bubble."

A voice broke the nervous couple away from their conversation, and Fanny stepped into the room. Her face was gaunt, and although she had seemingly just woken up, she was already on the edge of her anger.

"Where. Is. Bubble," she demanded, her plug tail flicking from her tone. Ruby stared at her, unsure of what she could say. What she should say. Unlike her partner, Fanny was similar to that of a ticking time-

Wait, Ruby winced. No. No reminders.

Angrily, Fanny stomped towards the two and all remain silent, their eyes narrowing towards one another. The electrical fan took her time staring into the snake-like eyes of Flower, but the taller stared with a scowl, searching for any possible way to get her to leave.

"We don't know where she is, thank you," the blossom replied. "Now, if you'll excuse us- we have a more IMPORTANT issue to deal with."

"WHAT KIND OF ISSUE?" Bracelety yawned, walking around the three with Ice Cube by her side. "WHAT'S GOING ON..?"

Somehow, the situation has graced the group with some kind of miracle; for none of the three lash out towards the familiar blue

bracelet. Instead, Flower turned towards her direction, answering her with a snappy tone.

"Book hasn't come home- she's been gone all NIGHT."

Just a mere sentence, and Ice Cube's heart sunk into her stomach. She shook her head, trying to get rid of the worried sense that clung at the center of her chest. "Didn't she take a walk after everything..?" she asked through her exhaustion.

"She did- and she never came HOME."

"I HATE HER! Because of her, Bubble got hurt- and now she's gone TOO!" Fanny snapped.

A swell in her chest immediately made the bloom's head snap towards her direction. Her feet shuffled, until the hands of her girlfriend brought her to a stop. Flower would have gazed down in her direction, but instead she found someone else with the turn of her head.

Dazed, Match dragged herself out of the bedroom, a thin robe draped over her body. Pencil was the next to step out of the room, silently adjusting her scarf with a soft huff. The mere sight of her was nothing short of familiar- except for the subtle melancholy in her eyes.

Her mouth opened. Ready to ask the same question yet again. But Fanny, now sick of the group, stormed through Flower and Ruby, shoving them aside with a scowl filled with hate.

"Move," she snapped. "I'm going to find her."

"Find who?" Pencil interjected, her arms folding across her chest. "What the spongy is going on this time?"

"Some captains you are," Fanny uttered under her breath. "Book and Bubble are missing- we have to find them NOW!"

"Bubble's missing?! She was-"

"I HATE BEING REMINDED OF WHAT HAPPENED! Listen- we have

to start a search party here!"

A search party? Bracelety's body tensed up at her friend's words. She knew that Freesmart didn't know of the disappearances- and there was no way in hell she'd risk telling them.

They were finally able to recover. Despite the chaos, things seemed to be going back on track. But then the nightmares came by, and their tower of comfort crumbled before them.

"Fanny..." Bracelety whispered as a warning. Despite her anger, Fanny quickly caught on, and her tail lowered with a pout, until Flower stepped forward.

"I'm in," she stated. "There's no way Book would.. leave like this."

And she was right. Ruby knew so especially. For the past few days, Book's smile brought joy to the atmosphere. She remembered how hard it was for her to try and move forward, especially before they had their talk.

She could especially remember this, back when the murders took place.

With a step forward, Ruby gave her a nod. "I'll go too."

"As long as we remember Bubble," Fanny gritted through her teeth. "This isn't just about Book-"

"To us, it IS! She's our GIRLFRIEND! OUR TEAMMATE!"

"And what about Bubble..?" Match stated, the conversation fully awakening her. "She's.. like. also a part of our team, too.."

"You guys forced her to sleep OUTSIDE!"

"Hey! It was, like, necessary!"

"NO IT WASN'T! WHAT IS-"

"CAN YOU ALL SHUT UP?!" Ice Cube screamed, and the girls pause mid argument, their mouths still agape. "NOW, LISTEN! This team

stuff doesn't MATTER right now- these are our friends! And WE HAVE TO MAKE SURE THEY'RE SAFE!"

Ruby frowned. "But what about-"

"-NOTHING! RUBY, THIS DOESN'T MATTER! WE WERE ALL HURT- WE ALL MADE MISTAKES WHEN EVERYTHING HAPPENED! BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU CAN GO AND HURT US BACK! DO YOU THINK THAT'LL GET RID OF BOOK'S NIGHTMARES?!"

Whatever tensions they may have had with one another dissipated at that moment. After a long silence, Pencil is the first to speak. "..Ice Cube's right. Come on- we have to start looking. Now."

"Agreed " Fanny said, shooting a glare towards Ruby and Flower. "Let's just find them and get them back."

To think- Ice Cube was prepared for another brawl to break out between them. She had braced herself for Pencil to snap, possibly kicking her and Bracelety out for good. But seeing her come to an agreement over her own directions, the frozen cube couldn't help herself from rushing to Bracelety's side, shivering from the adrenaline that coursed through her veins.

"Bracey.." she whispered. "I-..I just-"

"YOU PUT THEM IN THEIR PLACE! THAT'S WHAT YOU DID!" Bracelety cheered. "ALWAYS PAVING THE WAY, ICY! YOU'RE AWESOME!!"

"I-"

"Wrap it UP lovebirds!" Match snapped her fingers. "We've, like, got a search party to conduct!"

"OKAY, OKAY!"

The team poured out of the clubhouse door, and one by one, each object knocked on the doors of their slumbering neighbors, their words waking the city from its usual morning.

"Have you seen Book..?!"

A solemn shake from Cake's head.

"Bubble hasn't come home..."

A worried expression from Teardrop.

"It's been hours since Book left..!"

An offer to help from Nickel and Bomby.

"Do you think you could help us?!"

Soon, the faces of the massacre were on the scene, rushing around the city to try and find a clue as to where the two had gone. Minutes turned into hours, and as the sun dragged lazily across the sky, they continued their search, unable to stop themselves from...

No. They couldn't. It wasn't happening again.

It couldn't.

"Blocky!" Flower exclaimed, seeing him as his door finally swung open. "Have you seen Book by any chance?! Or Bubble?!"

"Nope. Sorry."

Blocky shoved the door to a close before she could have a chance to speak. He could hear Flower's angered murmuring, her stomps leading her down the steps, and out of his vicinity.

Finally.

For the poor guy couldn't handle anymore chaos for the day. After experiencing the hallucinations of his own so- Grassy, as well as Snowball, he noticed his body trembling, unable to ease itself into a complete stop.

Basketball was the one who helped him back to safety. Granted, she knew how he didn't want to return home, but something in her mind refused to let him stay at any other object's house. From there, she brought him back, and the two stayed in his living room.

The screams didn't come to a stop. It was a nightmare that blended with reality, trapping him with the taunting reminder of the regrets he carried throughout the past few weeks.

Not letting Grassy stay when he asked.

Not telling Snowball that he....

Fuck.

He wasn't sure when the screaming had stopped. One moment, he was huddled next to Basketball, murmuring to her as they both made a feeble attempt to comfort one another from scrambling out once again. Then, he blinked, and he found the sports ball leaning against his side, her eyes gradually coming to a close.

That's when he helped her home.

Blocky didn't waste any time throwing out the damned bottle of Zelatonin at his return. He made a mental note to punch that bozo- for this was one of the shittiest pranks she could have EVER done to him.

To everyone else, too.

Turning away, Blocky found himself walking back to his room, until another knock broke through the silence of his home. His hands snapped into tight fists, a sharp inhale following him as he silently stomped back to the door.

He expected to hear Ruby this time around. Or Pencil. One of those annoying Freesmarters that never seemed to go away.

Instead, Blocky's door opened to reveal the two grinning faces of his friends.

"Hey Blocky!" Pen greeted, waving excitedly towards the wooden block. "Woah- did you get something done to your face? I never knew you were into eye shadow! Pencil has a bunch of palettes she doesn't use, maybe I can-"

"I slept for two hours." Blocky's griffed reply quickly forced his friend

into silence, his smile dropping in shock.

"Oh- I-I'm sorry, I didn't-"

"No man, it.. It's fine.." he reassured himself, wincing at the burning in his throat. "..It was just a rough night."

Frowning, Eraser adjusted the container of fruits in his arms. "Did you have those nightmares too.."

"Unfortunately."

"No worries bro. I also had one.. it was a long night for everyone," Eraser uttered, using his free hand to hold onto Pen's a little more tightly. "I have no idea why it hit out of nowhere.."

"Let's not talk about it. What are you guys doing here..?"

His question made Pen's face lighten. "Oh- w-we just wanted to come by and make some smoothies!" he stated, gesturing towards the container that his boyfriend held.

Exhaustion mixed into a proper cup of confusion, as Blocky's eyebrow lifted in puzzlement. Smoothies? What were these two going on about?

"..Don't you guys have your own blender?" he asked, rubbing the back of his head.

"W-We do! But- it's.. kinda.. busted..?" Pen reminded him.

"What did you do to it."

"Nothing! It's not like we did it on purpose- we aren't trying to sneak around the question here!"

"I'M NOT SNEAKING!" Coiny's shout echoed from a few feet away, causing the three to turn.

Whilst they were busy conversing amongst one another, the familiar coin had been making his way back through the city, an empty tote bag slung over his shoulder. There wouldn't have been a care in the

world- if it weren't for the change in Coiny's attitude.

"We.. weren't talking about you?" Eraser stated. Coiny blinked away any confusion, before an apologetic smile burst from his face, tossing the three a friendly wave.

"O-Oh man, haha!" He laughed. "Sorry about that- thought you were talking about me there!"

"And what if we were?" Blocky asked.

"Well- er..."

"Exactly. Now, make your way to it, coin-creature. Pen, Eraser- c'mon. My blender works just fine- maybe some smoothies could wake me up somehow..."

Well, despite the sour reply, Coiny gave the three a happy wave, zig-zagging through the city and making his way back home. He noticed the others aimlessly going from door to door, but his heart paid no mind to it.

He could finally breathe. After months of silence and months of keeping to himself, he had transformed into the beauty that freedom promised, his soul feeling much lighter than it has ever felt before.

His path continued, until a familiar metallic flame came into view.

"Hey, Firey!" Coiny greeted cheerfully. "I'll catch you later- I need to get some more of those Yoylito's- I'm telling you, they're the best chips you could ever have!"

It had been five hours. Five hours since Firey had awoken, finding himself with a knife in his hands. Five hours since he realized that his nightmares nearly brought him to injure his girlfriend, only for Coiny to run in, throwing a pillow at them and telling them to keep quiet.

Although it helped cool things down, the tension between Leafy and Firey was harsh. Leafy was already tackling the guilt from mistakenly attacking Saw- but to have Firey tackling her awake was enough to warn her of his possible distrust. As for Firey... Well, he could barely look at himself.

He often reached for Leafy. Wishing to try and talk to her. But the tension felt as if it were going to snap. Firey didn't want to lose her again, especially after he had just settled their troubles from before. So instead, he helped her with anything she needed, and he stayed quiet.

Yet, it had been five hours since the two had seen Coiny. A little while after, Leafy heard him shuffling through the house, followed by the sound of the door opening and closing. She sleepily assumed that it was just another case of the midnight munchies, but when she awoke to find his room empty, she couldn't help but wonder if he had left to take his mind off of things.

"Coiny, where have you-" Leafy's words faded into silence as the coin creature stepped away. Curious, Firey would watch, blinking in astonishment.

"...Where the heck has he been?" he asked.

"My thoughts exactly," Leafy uttered. "You didn't happen to see him this morning, have you..?"

"Nope."

"Weird.."

Wait. Leafy was speaking with him now- maybe he could try and-

"You both notice his sudden shift, too?"

Well. There went that chance.

Both heads turned to meet Fries, who was now making his way towards their direction. Confused, Leafy wished to ask him what he was doing- before he spoke.

"I know Coiny's been acting off," he explained.

"It's that noticeable, huh?"
"Yes- especially when he was miserable beforehand."

"And why do you care if he's miserable or not?" Firey snapped. "Me

personally, I'm enjoying it!"

Leafy shot him a glare. "Firey!"

"Sorry."

Fries shut his eyes and tried, as best as he could, to sort through the reasons as to why he should bother. Despite his possible efforts, Coiny brought many painful reminders to him and his 'family', and he needed to remember why he dared to subject himself to this care-fest.

That's when the memory floods his mind. The scar on his chest. The talk they had mere weeks ago. Learning that his scar wasn't her doing.

And then, the memories of his own death. Seeing Coiny's ghast expression. Hearing his voice, followed by ringing.. Then silence.

"..I just have a bad feeling about that coin," he uttered.

"Are you sure you're not risking it here..?" Leafy whispered, gesturing with one hand toward Coiny's direction.

"Leafy, this is serious," Fries insisted. "If anything, I want to make sure that he's safe. He told me something the other day- and it's worrying the everloving hell out of me. So, I'm going to make sure nothing is wrong. You both say he's rarely in the house anymore?"

"What did he say?" Firey asked, resulting in a hard nudge from the lemon leaf. "Oof- okay. Pretty much- it's rare to come home and see him!"

"Really?"

"It's... a little strange." Leafy's eyes fell to the ground, rubbing the back of her arm hesitantly. "You'd think it'd be because he's feeling down- but when we are able to see him, he looks so.. Happy?"

"It's disgusting." Firey chuckled under his breath.

Fries raised an eyebrow. He shook his head, turning towards Leafy with a hand on his own side.

"...Looks like I'll have to see what he's up to, then."

"Are you sure about this?"

"Listen, I-I.. I need to know."

"Last time I heard- he was on a vacation."

So that was the lie they could come up with? Bottle couldn't believe it. Her hands wrung together, the knots in her 'stomach' tightening as she looked towards the sports balls.

She had finally managed to get a better look throughout the city. So many of her hours were spent breaking into abandoned buildings, and her own will power had become drained when she crossed another location off of the list she had.

Days continued to pass, and her headaches only grew more frequent. Her head cracked from the immense pain that she endured, and she couldn't imagine where she'd be if Pie and Woody weren't there to help. But it wasn't enough to shield her from the rumors that circulated through the TLC-ers.

Many spoke about Snowball's disappearance. Cloudy was spotted, searching aimlessly over the city for Balloony.

It was only until she found out about Saw and Gaty's departure that made her curious.

Everyone in the TLC was equally as excited when they had finally broken free. Each one of them heard rumors of Yoyle City, and there were many adventures that awaited their presences, promising an exciting future for them all.

This was why it never made sense. Bottle remembered how excited Tree was to escape. How he had promised to spend his time venturing forth, and not only living his life to the fullest, but living it alongside her own.

The same went for the others. Grassy. Snowball. And most recently, to her dismay, Balloony, Gaty, and Saw.

With a solemn nod, she tried to keep her spirits up, not wanting to come off as suspicious towards the scientists.

"I'm sure," she assured her.

Confused, Golf Ball threw a glance towards her partner, her head tilting to the side.

Perhaps it was the Zelatonin wearing off- it was a good 62.431 percent that it was the case- but she swore to putts, that Tree chose to venture beyond the city.

It was the last thing she heard of him. Some say he wanted out of here, others said he wished to explore what was out there. And quite frankly, she didn't seem to care.

Meeting the smaller scientist's gaze, Tennis Ball shook his head with a sigh. "And... you brought the others.. because..?"

That's when Golf Ball turned. To her dismay, she caught sight of six other objects, all standing behind Bottle with a nervous smile.

"W-Well," Taco stammered. "We.. came by to ask the same question!"

"What? Did other people go with Tree or something?" Golf Ball snapped.

"Yez! And we wanted to make zure they were okhay." Cloudy assured. "In caze of anything.. we just wanted to be here to revive them."

Squinting, Golf Ball silently adjusted her glasses. It wasn't until Basketball stepped into the hall, when she noticed Rocky trailing right behind her.

"Hey, HEY! What is he doing here?!" the scientist exclaimed. "This is a PRIVATE situation!"

"He wanted to see you, Golf Ball," Basketball said, giving a soft smile

towards her nephew. "Figured it wouldn't hurt if I brought him along..?"

Dammit.

One look, and Golf Ball's tension softened. Even if it was only for a moment, she shook her head, gesturing towards the table.

"Take a seat," she stated. "We can talk once we're done. Alright?"

"GOLF BALL!"

When the sound of multiple footsteps rumbled through the lab, Golf Ball's anger flickered back. "Oh for PUTTS SAKE!" she shouted. "WHAT DO YOU ALL POSSIBLY WANT NOW?!"

I stare at the familiar door in front of me, and then I knock again. I have to wait for a good minute or two for the door to open, and I when my eyes meet Blocky's, I force myself to flinch.

I have to admit. I'm drained. There's nothing much left of me anymore- I only want to get myself patched up, and then I can go back to the clubhouse.

To them.

All of them.

He stares at me- blinking, until his face drops into an all-familiar glare.

"Hey, you know your stupid little alliance is looking for you, right?"

'You know Grassy/Snowball is looking for you, right?~'

She cackles from her smart remark, and I hold my wounds, easily finding myself quivering from the pain.

"I need help," I whisper.

"We've known this," *Blocky murmurs. I don't know why, but today, his words strike me more than usual. It could have been the wounds on me, and it must be showing from my eyes, because his expression softens.*

"..I didn't-"

"You- have a first aid kit..." I say, weakly stumbling closer to him. "I.. I need to use it.."

I can immediately tell that this sets him off. Because that softened look cemented back into the angered glare he had before, his head shaking in the silence of my words. "The hell- how do you- look, just go to the lab. I'm sure those bozos can get whatever you have going on there fixed."

"I can't wait. I-I need- to patch these wounds up, now," I plead. I wasn't lying either. My body screamed with pain every time I tried to move- and not only that, my chest ached from the events that had occurred before, her dying breaths echoing in the back of my mind.

My bloodied satchel swung as I clutched my shoulder, and when the world begins to tilt to its side, I lose my balance, until his hands clasp over my shoulders. I blink, attempting to gather the strength I needed to get myself back to my feet, but it was still gone.

All I could think about was her. What I've done.

Everything that I have done.

I can't even blame her for her commands anymore- for this was carried out by my hands. I promised myself that I'd stay loyal to her, but it had already been broken.

Her hands in the garden proved it.

The floor beneath me slowly shifted, as I found myself staring at the grass, then the stairs, and ultimately, the tiles of the kitchen floor. Blocky's grumbling filled my 'ears', before he slowly placed me down onto the kitchen chair, giving me a dirty look as he stepped away.

"You'd better be thankful," *he growls, turning away to retrieve the first aid kit. I ignore his anger, too weakened to try and defy him. My eyes scan the kitchen, and I take in the sights of the object that I had never*

gotten to know very well.

A pile of stained cups remained in the sink. Next to it stood a blender, standing on its place on the drying mat. An empty container was also on the other side, and that's when the faint smell of fruit drifted towards me.

I continue to look around. The table is empty beside a singular picture frame, one where my reflection stares back at me. I only capture it for a second, because my eyes adjust, and I see a photo of Blocky, his usual smile beaming as he stood beside Snowball. Grassy, who was in the center, waved happily towards the camera, and this only makes my heart lurch with another wave of grief.

That's when I hear his footsteps. With the kit now in his grasp, he slams it onto the table, forcing it open before shoving my hands aside.

"Quitate." (Move.) *He uttered. I wince- so does he, when he sees the fresh bite mark on my shoulder. I know how to deal with the treatments for these kinds of wounds, and although I stare hesitantly at his disturbed expression, I speak.*

"Y-..You have to- disinfect it-"

"I know," *he interrupts, turning to grab the supplies he needed. I watched as his hand hovered over the bandages, and I hear him utter.* "Great. Now I'm wasting resources I could have used for them.."

"For who..?" I ask, expecting him to pause. Instead, he grabs the bandages, ripping them open without any hesitation.

"Snowball and Grassy."

I stare at him, and to my surprise, he stares back, almost as if he were expecting something to happen. A scream, a frenzy.. anything.

But instead, I find nothing. He hesitantly returns to my wounds, as I feel a tear running down my blood-stained cheek.

Mere minutes ago, six objects had come down to the lab. Now there were 22, all anxiously awaiting both scientists' instructions.

Although Tennis Ball tried to get Golf Ball to a quieter room, she refused to leave the side of the machine. His worry ate away at him, already trying to help her off of the Zelatonin that had infused into her system.

But hearing the stories of these objects somehow 'leaving' filled him with dread. Especially as he looked around- for every face in there was a victim of Pin's massacre. He had to remind himself that it was nothing to be worried about.

This was just the responsibility that came with caring for everyone.

He silently applauded his cousin- for he was just fine looking out for a mere twenty few of them. She looked out for the rest, especially when he wasn't able to. Much like now.

At the table, on the side of the room, Basketball quietly placed some blank sheets of paper down, adjusting the small container of crayons that were at his side. Although he couldn't write, Rocky did wish to doodle, until he could hang out with both Tennis Ball and Golf Ball of course.

Whether it was helping her through her grief, or her illness- Tennis Ball was relieved to see her back on her feet.

Once Rocky was settled, Basketball made her way to his opposite side, glancing towards Bottle with a gentle movement. "Looks like we should start with Tree, and move our way down. Does that sound okay to you all?"

"Anything to ensure their safety," Lollipop answered with her hands on her hips. Beside her, Gelatin swore he could hear a tinge of fear in her voice, but he shook the thought away, simply standing by their side.

Teardrop was quick to notice this, though. She tapped on his shoulder, signing to see if he was alright. He nodded in response, but said no words- for their attention would soon drift back towards the

recovery center.

Nobody knew that this was a lie. Telling them these people had gone off to some vacation. Unfortunately, with every second that passed, doubt seeped through the cracks of stability, and their heartbeats raced with anticipation to see what was next.

The familiar clicks of the buttons echo through there lab, and Bottle's throat tightened as she held her breath, staring at the screen where Tree's name spelled into existence. Golf Ball followed Tennis Ball's movements- which was strange, usually she was the one who handled situations like this. But Bottle didn't bother to question it.

Tree's name blinked on the screen, anticipating the confirmation from the big green button. It seemed like the voices that nervously chattered over one another had gone silent, growing curious towards the scene before them.

ERROR! ERROR!

TREE IS STILL ALIVE.

"No," Basketball shook her head, begrudgingly moving in front of her cousins place. "That can't be right. Here- let me do it."

Tennis Ball frowned. "Basketball-"

"Shh."

From there, she tried again. Typing Tree's name. Staring at his

blinking name. She could feel Bottle's eyes locking onto her, but she didn't care, slamming down against the green button.

ERROR! ERROR!

TREE IS STILL ALIVE.

All of her feelings had been seen. They were released, free from the box she had entrapped them in.

So when she saw the error message on the screen, Basketball felt the weight of those emotions crushing her to nothingness. Now tethered to the screen, she gritted her teeth, her limbs turning into static as they typed the following names.

G-R-A-S-S-Y.

"Wasn't he on vacation..?" Golf Ball uttered, squinting at the screen.

ERROR! ERROR!

GRASSY IS STILL ALIVE.

"No," Basketball whispered.

S-N-O-W-B-A-L-L.

"Wait- I asked, Pen where he ran off to.. He didn't.." Pencil's words trailed from her tongue, as her face became gaunt.

ERROR! ERROR!

SNOWBALL IS STILL ALIVE.

"Please," the pressure in her chest grew tighter, burning from the dread that blazed through her body.

B-A-L-L-O-O-N-Y.

"He never came back.." Cloudy spoke with a frown on his face.

S-A-W. G-A-T-Y.

"They wouldn't ever leave like that! Saw and Gaty LOVED the city- they were our FRIENDS!" Taco shouted.

B-O-O-K. B-U-B-B-L-E.

ERROR! ERROR!

Basketball backed away from the machine. "They're still alive.."

THEY ARE ALL STILL ALIVE.

Tennis Ball stared at the screen, puzzled by the scene that unfurled with every passing second. Golf Ball stared, blinking a few times, before she then rushed towards the hall, a noticeable frown curving on her face.

She couldn't. She had to keep herself together.

It was just the recovery center. A possible malfunction. A bug, perhaps?

Once she reached the room she searched for, Golf Ball dove into her supplies, sprinting back and forth to try and get a better look at the recovery centers inner workings.

But that's when she noticed the empty display. The object that should have been there, now missing from its stand.

Underneath, a statement was engraved into a gold-plate, all written in the yoyle language.

It's translation read *"Yoylite Fragment."*

So when she found herself staggering back to the room, and finding herself face-to-face with those she had wished to save, her expression was enough to bring them down the hill of realization.

Golf Ball's lips moved. She wasn't sure what words slipped from her mouth, but whatever it was destroyed everyone in the room.

"No!" Bottle let out a hollow cry of fear, and the others soon followed. The more Basketball looked, the more chaos erupted from the crowd she had promised to protect.

Needle buried her face into her hands, and her body shook from the

sobs that crashed through her body. Teardrop's pupils had shrunk into near nothingness; her arms now desperately trying to calm her girlfriend. Or perhaps, comforting herself.

Either way, it wouldn't work. Nothing would work.

"Th-This," Nickel's quaking voice grabbed Basketball's eye. "This has to be a joke. It's a joke- r-right..?!"

"Nickel," Bomby whispered, his hands trembling.

"No- stop messing with us! Nothing about this is funny!" Even in his state of disbelief, Nickel's eyes stung with tears. He lost control over his body, now feeling the fear that sent him into a shivering mess.

That's when Leafy stumbled across the two. Although her face was blank, her eyebrows slowly furrowed together, her body reacting to the news before her brain could.

"Leafy..?" Firey's voice sounded a million miles away, fading.. falling.. into, what she could only describe as, oblivion.

Basketball watched as the lemon leaf trailed to the wall, her breathing growing frantic with every wheeze that broke her own silence. Her movements grew faster, and her legs gave in, her arms clutching her own chest.

She didn't even notice that she was rocking herself. Nor did she notice Firey, who scrambled to her side, desperately making an effort to soothe her.

"Leafy?" he whispered, rubbing her back with rushed movements. "Hey- Leafy, come on- Leafy..!"

"No.. no..." Was all Leafy could whisper, her face scrunching into a mortified frown. She tried to cry. She had to cry. There was no way she could carry this feeling of terror any longer; tears had to help, it was supposed to do so.

But when a tear rolled down her cheek, her eyes glazed over. Tuning out from the world, avoiding the haunting memories of her 'best friend,' someone she had come to care for so much, yet someone who

shattered any trust she ever had.

It couldn't be. Please, it couldn't. Not again.

Now, Basketball's eyes were scrambling back and forth, the walls of her own failures caving in with every face that came into view.

Gelatin's baffled look slowly morphed into realization. Even as Lollipop tried to reassure him, he slipped away from her reach, no longer hearing the voices of the two he had come to trust.

Beside him, Woody was now reduced to a panicking, sniveling mess. Any remaining crumb of courage perished from him- for he wished to comfort Bottle, but the nightmares were returning. They were already here.

And although Bottle and Pie both reached for him, he scrambled back. Not knowing who to trust. If he could trust again.

To the side, Match looked as if she had seen a ghost. Her hands were hovered over her open mouth, small squeaks of fear slipping past her closing throat. Pencil's fists had tightened, and when she tried to put an arm around Match, she jumped back, her warmth.. now.. reminding her of what it once was.

What it could soon be. Once again.

But the sound of shattering glass made Basketball's head turn. An infuriated Flower, with emptied beakers in her hands, now stormed through the room, breaking them with a racing heart.

Usually, Ruby was the one to comfort her from these fits. Instead of this, her eyes were glued to the screen, Book's name still flashing in her mind.

But for Ice Cube? The news had reduced her into shock. For she didn't say a thing. Didn't move a single inch.

She was back into a statue. Frozen, with nothing but terror behind those eyes of hers.

And Bracelety tried to help her- but when her arms prepared to wrap

around the cube, the hyperventilation began.

Then, Fanny's screams.

Angered ones. Stomping, her plug tail twitched, and she was furious at the news that had befallen them all.

Yet, the tears running down her face said otherwise. Especially when she wailed out the name of her lover.

Even through the chaos, Basketball expected Golf Ball to snap. To scream, to demand that everybody get themselves out of her damn laboratory.

Maybe if it weren't for her own creation, those bits of her old self may have remained. The orange sports ball took note of her silence, and when she turned, she was met with the stunned expression that coated her face.

It wasn't until she began to whisper, when her mouth curved into a frown.

"It's happening again," she whined. "It.. It's actually happening again.."

"G-Golf Ball-" Tennis Ball stumbled with every step he took, trying to get to his girlfriend. "Golfie- I-"

"It's happening again..!!"

Those words solidified the truth, cementing it into the present, and trapping them without any means of escape. Hushed whispers spiked into panicked screams, wails echoing all around the orange sports ball.

She could feel her feet trailing back, her body becoming much lighter than it already was. Basketball never believed a word that Golf Ball said- the two bickered daily since their recovery- but when it came to something she had experienced..

How could she deny it.

Because now, vivid images of the missing sparked through her mind. Tree. Snowball. Balloony. Gaty and Saw.

Grassy.

No.

Her heart froze with terror.

"Grassy wants to play in the rain..!"

No.

"Be back before sundown, alright..?"

Please.

"Bye ma-.. Basketball..!!"

"What does GB mean..?"

The voice. The confusion behind those innocent eyes of his. When Basketball looked down towards Rocky, she swore, she could see Grassy once more.

And that was enough to break her once more.

The realization; it settled in.

The murders.

The missing.

The hands.

It was back.

All back again.

"It's happening all over again."

Footsteps.

The occasional crunch of gravel.

And then, the path.

Fries wandered through the forest, trying to recall Coiny's footsteps. It was a little bit of a struggle to keep track of every turn he took, but the sights around him screamed unfamiliarities. He had left Puffball at home for the day; poor thing had fallen ill, and after making sure she had food and water in her system, he left her to rest, just in time for him to try and follow the coin-creature's path.

Last time he had seen him, the bag he carried was empty. This time, his bag was filled, his eyes shifting back and forth to ensure... something.

Fries didn't know what. But he was here to find out.

Trees. A thicket. The clearing. Faint sounds of a rushing river.

But then the voices found its way into his 'ears'.

"Aw, Coiny, you didn't have to-"

"I did! These are the BEST chips in the city- you have to try!!"

"Are you sure..?" Pin asked. She could already tell just how much these chips meant to him- and she didn't want to eat them, despite the hunger pangs that stung at her stomach. Yet, Coiny insisted, carefully giving her the open bag.
"Come on- I brought them just for you.." He smiled.

"...You ate some didn't you."

"Yeah..."

The sound of their laughter harmonized with the winds. Coiny couldn't stop himself from blushing, but it was no use- for Pin's smile melted his heart, illuminating the world that was once so dull.

He patiently sat beside her, making sure she ate the food that he had managed to bring. Light conversations filled the cave with the echoes of their former selves, and, for a second, it felt as if things were back to the way they were. Even with the scars. His hand cradled hers, letting her take in the warmth of his palm until she finished, wiping her mouth from the crumbs of the food. Their voices fall into a hush, and they become lost amongst each other's gaze, their hands now clinging to one another.

They didn't want to let this go. They never wanted to let each other go, and when the two embraced, Pin's whispers broke the hush that had befallen over them.

"Promise me."

Coiny blinked. "Promise you... what...?"

"Promise me you'll stay."

To stay... Well, the simple request was enough to make him smile. He clutched her close to himself, placing a kiss on the side of her cheek as he caressed the back of her head.

"I will, Pin... I, I understand if-"

"PIN?!"

In the tense atmosphere of Blocky's kitchen, he makes his final effort to close the gash on my cheek. Bandage wrappers and empty packaging lay scattered all around us, as he was forcibly focused on getting my bleeding to stop.

His careful movements were especially interesting to see. Draping the bandages over my stinging wounds. Shutting broken skin cells as he closed them tightly. He moves his way around, mending my broken parts to assure that I'm safe from collapse.

He continues to rant underneath his breath. I can only assume that he

thinks I'm ignoring him, but his words find their way back to my 'ears.' He curses me, curses at my wounds, and rants about how he would have to find another kit later, in case anything popped up.

Thanks to him, with every wound he patched up, the more my anger was able to swell.

*Stepping back, he turns the kitchen sink on, immediately washing the remaining blood on his hands. "*You're all set," *he sighed out.* "Feel free to pick up the trash and clean up."

Confused, I find myself reaching for the wrappers, until I stop. "What..?"

"You heard me. Clean up! I don't have time to wrap this up- I need some sleep."

'Oh.. are you really going to let him talk to you like that?'

"I-I need a minute, Blocky.." My words leave in the form of a sigh. "Everything's still spinning.. I really... don't want to pass out here, but..-"

"But NOTHING. I don't want to wake up to a mess! You've already bothered me by using up the things I had saved for a reason. The LEAST you could do is clean this shit up."

My tender skin radiated with pain, but the more he spoke, the more the anger nulled the aches. "I never meant to stop by here, I- I only needed to-"

"No me digas NADA." ("Don't tell me ANYTHING.")

'Uh-oh...'

"Blocky, please-"

"He was right about you- you're only here to MOCK us. MOCK ME."

'Really now..?'

"All you have ever done is MESS THINGS UP. You try to comfort us with your ridiculous 'acts of kindness,' but you know what?! IT NEVER HELPED. YOU?! NEVER HELPED US. AND THE WORLD

WOULD BE FANTASTIC IF YOU DID US ALL A FAVOR, AND KILLED YOURSELF."

That's when I shoot up from my chair. No longer caring about the pain, or the risks, my hands slam against his chest, sending him across the kitchen. He slammed into the wall, which knocked the remaining breath out of him. The impact cracked through the atmosphere, and it's enough of a sign for me to step forward.

I see the utensils on the drying mat, and I waste no time grabbing the knife from its place, until he speaks.

"Te quiero."

My grip on the knife loosens. "What...?"

"No. That was for Snowball. This is for YOU."

Before I could see it, he tackled me to the ground, and a shower of punches plummet over my body. I scream, wildly flailing my arms to try and slap him. This forced his fists deeper into my wounds, and when his hand grabs my scars, I drive my knee into his chest. When he screams, I shove him aside, and he lays there. Whining. Pathetic.

I raise the knife to finish him off, but then he screams.

"WHAT DID YOU DO?! QUÉ HICISTE CON MI FAMILIA?!" (WHAT DID YOU DO TO MY FAMILY?!)

"Oh, come on... I was nice to all of you.. Wasn't that enough?" I gritted through my teeth, backing away as his writhing came to a stop.

"Y-Your kindness meant NOTHING TO US."

"Really.. So you're telling me you didn't even enjoy my cake..?" I whisper. My mouth twitches, and I struggle to contain the smile that begins to bloom on my face. He pulls himself from the ground, wincing at the pain that burst from his chest before he glared back towards her.

His body trembled with rage. I could practically see the fumes coming from his head, and I smirk, which only makes him angrier.

"The fuck do you THINK."

"Aww... I thought you all would have appreciated it..."

When my giggling fills the room, his eyes narrow. I can tell he's piecing things together, 'but oh... isn't it more enjoyable when you reveal things that they could have never seen before..?'

"Why the fuck are you talking about it," *he snapped.* "I'll have you know that we were trying to look for Grassy at the time- your little tea party session would have been nothing but-"

"But he made it with all the love he could give!"

"What..? The fuck are you-"

"It worked wonderfully, too. I never imagined that grass and flesh could bake so well with the oranges I had used..."

At first, he stared at me in confusion. The rage in his eyes dissipated alongside the steam, and I can tell he was lost from the moment those words left my mouth.

But then it hits. The cake. Grassy's disappearance. The flavoring. The ingredients.

I can only smile, staggering back as Blocky let out an audible gag. He scrambled to the sink, and the sounds of his retching fell underneath our own giggling. His back twitched and jerked with every horrible noise that emitted from his throat, as the contents of his stomach splattered all over the sink.

My hand clenches the knife. And as I stand beside the table, he whirls around, his face now drained of his color, despite the rage that blazed in his eyes...

"I'M GONNA FUCKING KILL YOU, **BUBBLE!**"

That's when his retching falls into silence, and my eyes zip straight back to the picture frame.

His family vanishes. In their place, my metallic reflection fades into

existence, and my blood runs cold.

No.

It...

I couldn't...

'Oh.. looks like you've finally tuned back in, dear.'

No...

'But don't worry..'

No..

'It's much easier than trying to be a hero.'

Maybe in the past, I would have burst from the sentence. The stress might have taken me down, and I'd be here, following Blocky's demand of ending my own life.

But I stay standing. Not because of my own kindness. My heroic acts.

Because I'm nothing of the sort.

I'm a villain.

No matter how hard I try, I will forever be the villain.

So... I might as well act like it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Blocky staggering to his feet. His trembling cemented itself back into anger, and he lunged at me, forcibly grabbing my arm with the knife, and aimed it at my chest. I screamed, swerving to the side, taking the blade into my unharmed shoulder.

"DIE! FUCKING DIE ALREADY!" *he screamed with a hoarse voice. My head roared with pain, and I forced my head down, biting Blocky as hard as I could.*

The taste of iron poured into my jaw. His screams echo, and as he tries to get me off, but I yank the knife from my wound, and slam it deep into

Blocky's side.

"Y-You.." *he hissed through pained gasps.* "You.. NEVER deserved PEACE."

I knew I had to do something. I only had a moment until his screams would be heard. My eyes scramble around the kitchen, which had now become more of a mess, until-

'GRAB THE BLENDER.'

And I do. Grabbing Blocky by the back of his head, I hurl him into the air, and lead him towards the counter. He's disoriented at first, but when I plug the blender into the outlet, it sends him into a thrashing frenzy. "NO-NO NO-"

I slam his face straight into the center. Glass shatters, its fragments scattering all around us. A few pieces had lodged straight into Blocky's face, and his screams quickly gargled into agonized wails, as I forced his head deeper and deeper into the glass.

"Fuck. You," I whisper, digging my nails into the back of his head.

I watch as the blades pierce through his eyeballs, its fluids oozing into the blender below. With the press of a button, a mechanical roar cracks through my skull, and his screams melt with the sounds of his own shredding flesh.

Even with this noise, I scream with the machine. Wailing.

"FUCK YOU!"

It was overheating.

"I DESERVED PEACE!"

Smoke danced above the blender.

"I DESERVED A HAPPY ENDING!"

His body jerked violently.

"BUT IT WAS TAKEN AWAY FROM ME!!"

His gargles silenced.

"THE MOMENT. I. CAME BACK!!!"

Sparks then burst from the outlet, and that's when I found the silence. The blades of the blender had stopped long ago, leaving a deep crimson mess that painted over the surface of the counter. I breathe heavily, grunting as I lift his head from the blender.

But it was stuck. Pieces of his skull were lodged into its edges, and broken fragments of his teeth were now scattered all around us, almost like some sort of confetti. I grunt, grabbing the blender, and, with all my strength, I yank it from his face.

Or, what used to be his face. Because I stare down at him... and there's nothing recognizable about him. No eyes. No mouth. Not even a structure.

....At least it isn't a glare.

Finally.

There was a moment of dead silence. Just us- together, coated in our own blood. It wasn't until a wheeze broke past his open wounds, that made me jump.

I couldn't believe it. How was it possible?
There was nothing- his jaw dangled by veins and strands of his own flesh... I could see the way his throat opened and closed with every pained breath he took. And when I notice the glowing from my satchel, I realize now that-

'This will do nicely.'

Blocky's sounds are haunting. Too haunting for me to even try and describe.

But no matter what I do, it will never leave me.

She will never leave.

Because I am forever tethered to her.

Alive, but never myself.

Free, but constricted to her choices.

Can you see me now?

---

yesterday, I graduated college. and today, the vessel is revealed.

Hello everyone I am quite exhausted!

"Why make bubble a vessel ? Why make bubble evil?" Girl deserved to be evil, idc if she's a bubble, her object form does not equal the kind of object she is. And while yes, she's generally kind- she is someone who stands her ground and won't hesitate to do so. It's subtle moments we see this, but they're there for a reason. Bubble is a character that is unfortunately reduced to the "shy and weak" stereotype, when THIS GIRL MANAGED TO LIFT AN ENTIRE TEAM IN BFB HELLO???? She can lift. Queen. It's also a tragic ending for her. Again. Making it so far, and thinking you're free... only to find out you're the one who's starting it again. Tragedy! We gotta love it. And before I get the "she's out of character", remember. Scarlets draining her of the girl she used to be. It's a parasite that makes you lose your sense of self.

"Why isn't book the vessel she was the perfect vessel, SHE deserved to be evil" ....it felt too predictable. In my opinion? Maybe bc of her own arc in fear garden 1, or maybe bc shes still a little villainized from her little arc in bfb. It's honestly a dumb reason but fg! Book has bpd (she's like me fr). I didn't want to write a character like her into some sort of villain- it felt a little off putting. Yes, she would have made a badass villain. Trust me. But I didn't want to feed into the

"villanization of mentally ill characters" in a way. There are ways of getting it right, but for me.. Book is a character that didn't deserve that path. But she's still a character that's hurting. Her pain led her to actions that she regretted. And now, her pain led her to doing something she can never return from. It's really a tragic arc, and it really might seem dumb to people. But as someone w BPD (someone who does relate heavily to book), I was a little tired of giving her that sort of villainization. So I gave her traits of her own self doubt. The ugly thoughts that really destroyed her from the inside out. Even when Book got what she wished for, her happy ending didn't come to be; that trauma and doubt consumed her. It's sort of like a message saying "hey, mental illness ain't pretty".

But uh.... Yeah.... Hopefully some people aren't ticked off by this decision. I was just as nervous as you all for the reveal, for this reason!

anyways.. GRADUATION WAS CRAZY. It was hectic and I wanted to spend the day celebrating with my family. As for me... I am going to sleep for a week. Straight /silly

I hope you all enjoy fear garden 2... because although we know who she is now. there's still so much left to see...

alright! see you all soon :] bye!

-ice

Deal?

Is this real..?

Am I alive..?

'Yes. You're here now dear.

'And personally, I'd like to welcome you back my friend.'

'We have so much to discuss.'

Who are you..-

'Please, darling. Let's worry about that later. I can already tell you're so, so tired..'

....I need to go back to Golf Ba-

'No you do not.'

I have to- I- I HAVE-

'Do it. And I'll fucking kill you.'

...Okay.

'What?!'

Do it. I'm not scared of you. If you're gonna be around here- I'll take myself out.

'In front of your friends..?~'

I don't care. Whatever you are- I'm not letting you hurt my friends ever AGAIN-

'Then I'll just kill them once again!'

...

'Oh? Did I strike a nerve there?'

What do you want...

'Darling. Please- let's discuss this at a pace. For now, I think we should try and get straight to the point.

'You know who I am. And I know who you are. We are quite alike; qualities that we share all across the board. I especially admire this strength of yours~'

Strength..?

'Why so shocked..? It was something I noticed long ago- not just your emotional strength.. but physical..'

..Nobody's ever said that about me before.

'I see...'

Usually people tell me how I'm.. special. They talk down to me like I'm.. some sort of-

'Weakling?'

No, I-

'Gosh, dear- why are you holding BACK from this?!'

From what?!

'You're being so hesitant; not finding that flame within to make yourself KNOWN. Aren't you tired of being treated this way?!'

No! They don't mean anything bad- I- I-

'Have you forgotten what they've done to you...? How they've treated you..?'

'They think you're pathetic. weak. Nothing.'

'Wouldn't you like to prove them wrong...?'

I DON'T CARE ANYMORE, OKAY?! Whatever they think- it doesn't matter! All I want is for everyone to be SAFE from her!

'...Oh... I see.'

'Well.. I could always find someone else.. granted it'll only happen over and over.'

No, it won't-

'Believe me dear! It's happened so many times now... through every vessel I find, I get closer to getting the right one.'

Then I'll just be another failure to you.

'Not unless you listen...'

Go away-

'I could always choose one of your friends.. I did have another girl in mind. She wouldn't get me as far as I'd hoped.. but do you really want to see her suffer in such a way..?'

..I..

'Book is a woman of her word.. I've learned so much about her after everything- you could always give me up, and I'll happily leave you alone!'

'But heed my warning. If you do, I'll make sure you live through that nightmare once again. Book is destined to fail- she's going to crumble and tell that little gemstone EVERYTHING. I'll find a way to come back after every failure. Every mistake. And I'll ensure that you never know peace, ever again.'

'As for Book... heh, looks like she'll be treated just like Pin if this is the case. Do you really want to be the reasoning for her suffering..? For the suffering of your own friends..?'

NO!

'I'm sure I could find a new way to take Freesmart down.'

NO NO- PLEASE!

'And Fanny... why, she's quite the spitfire, isn't-'

OKAY!

OKAY OKAY, I'LL DO IT! I'LL DO WHATEVER YOU WANT, I SWEAR!

PLEASE- JUST PLEASE, DON'T HURT THEM! LET ME SPARE THEM AND I-I'LL-

'You'll complete my garden..?'

I'LL DO IT!

'...Ohhh.. don't cry dear. I know this must be hard..'

..I just wanted to move on.. and protect them all.. I don't want us to-.. oh my bubble blower..

'Trust me dear. I'm a woman of my word; once you follow my plan, you and your little friends will be safe... from everything that I do. After all- there's 62 of you.. is there not..?~'

...The TLC-er's got us out..

'Exactly. I'll guide you along the way- all you have to do is listen. And we'll go very, very far my dear..~'

...

'Come on.. People fall so in love with their pain, they can't leave it behind. Do you really want to be trapped in these memories? Because I can take them all away...'

..My name is Bubble.

'No need to introduce yourself to me! We've met before, remember?'

Yes, but... who are you..?

...

'The names Scarlet. It's an honor to finally meet you, dear!~'

I'm Back

Pin, Fries, and Coiny stare at each other, none of them daring to speak.

Suddenly, Fries spun towards the other direction, and Pin staggered onto her feet, fear in her voice. There's a blind panic that clouds the atmosphere, and it stunned Coiny with a blinked confusion. He stared at Fries and Pin, and their desperate attempts to outrun one another. After all this time he didn't know why he was here.

He knew this was a possibility, since the day he recovered her. He missed Pin, but this- he wasn't ready. He thought he'd be able to handle it, as he spent countless nights convincing himself that the others would move on.

Yet, here they were; exposed, without a plan to fall back on. Coiny whispered a silent plea for forgiveness, then started running. It wasn't long until Pin heard his footsteps, and she glanced back at him.

"Grab whatever you can- we're taking him down!" Her voice may have been her own, but her words carried a daunting reminder of the past. He knew it shouldn't have been, but somehow that was more terrifying than the outcome that'd play if Fries made it back to the city.

Glancing around, Coiny forced his questions into the back of his throat. He grabs whatever he can, and his eyes dart around the ring of trees that stretch endlessly around the forest. The trees taunted him, threatening to expose his misdeeds to the world that he could soon be exiled from. Every single one of them carried his secrets. And now someone was threatening to spill them.

Clutching the assortment of sticks and stones in his left arm, he took off, rocketing through the disorienting maze of trees.

Coiny came to recognize the path home very well, but enough had taken place to throw his mind out of the window.

The only images that claimed a faint recognition in his mind was that of Pin.

Pin.

He eventually catches up to their pace. Fries barreled down the path, with Pin's hands outstretched to try and grasp at his flailing movements. He stumbled, forcibly regaining his balance as her fingers desperately clawed mere inches away from his back.

And that's when the memories break through the barren floodgates of Coiny's mind. Suddenly, he's back in the garden. Cemented into the soil with the same pair of hands bringing down a damned trowel, driving it into Fries's back. Terror struck Coiny's spine like a lightning bolt, and his feet flew down the forest ground as he scrambled after them.

"GUYS," he cried. "FRIES, PIN- STOP RUNNING!" His words fell on deafened ears, and he continued to plead despite the burning of his throat. "STOP!"

Coiny drew nearer to Pin, swiftly passing her and Fries when he swerved to the left. Pin's body slammed against Coiny's with a brute force that resulted in the breath being knocked out of the coin creature. Pin's shivering forced him to ignore the pains that amplified through his muscles, and before he could have a chance to say her name, a pair of arms ripped Pin away from him, dragging her back and forcibly pinning her (lol) against the back of a tree. Fries managed to grab one of Coiny's rocks, and without hesitation, he trained it over Pin's throat, pressing it harder with every slowing second.

Instinctively, Coiny stepped towards her with a hoarse gasp, but a direct glare from Fries forced him back into his place. He raised his quivering arms, letting the remaining stones fall from his grasp in order to show that he was harmless. It had been a brief moment since he had taken a good look at Fries; their last interaction left them off on a sour note, and whilst Coiny had been blessed with the

opportunity of moving forward, the others had not. He could see this from the bags underneath Fries's eyes. The scars on his body screamed their permanence, and despite the exhaustion that rattled through his system, his eyes were haunted with terror and rage.

"Don't move.." were the only words that Coiny could manage, and Pin pressed herself further against the tree.

But it seemed like Fries wasn't having it. "SHUT IT," he yelled. "Stay AWAY from me- or I'll KILL YOU TOO." Kill. The word made Pin flinch, yet she shoved the fear down as the rock pressed harder against her throat. "FRIES, PLEASE!" Coiny's heart raced at the sight.

"YOU KNEW- ALL THIS TIME, YOU KNEW?!"

"I-I JUST- I WANTED HER BACK!"

For a second, the recognizable grief seeped through Fries's words. "HOW COULD YOU?!"

"NOBODY LISTENED TO ME FRIES! I COULDN'T- THIS WAS MY DECISION! SO LEAVE HER ALONE!"

"No way," Fries growled, pressing the stone harder against Pin. "If I'm going to do this- I'm going to make sure she knows *exactly* what it felt like."

Pin's pupils tightened at his words. As much as she wanted to thrash, to scream and push him away, her body had rooted itself into the tree. Unable to move, as if any energy had been zapped out of her, she could only stare at the unfolding situation in front of her, his words seeping through the cracks of her broken heart. Her breath had been held, and she realized how much of a trickster time itself could be.

Could the others sense this? Everything seemed to freeze, and the eyes of the past were now fixed onto this very moment. Pin- the one responsible for the massacre of Yoyle City- now laying at the hands of a victim who's fury convinced him that he had nothing to lose. "F-Fries," she tried to plead, but it resulted in the rock jabbing harder against her throat.

Fries's eyes narrowed with rage. "What," he uttered, "Are you trying to beg for your life here?"

The world falls into the wretched hands of the past, and suddenly, Pin can no longer take in any familiarities from the world around her. All she could recognize was the fury that roared from Fries's pupils, and the words that left here were, "I'm not."

"Come on. I know you don't want to die- surely it'd be much kinder than what awaits you after death. Just ask! Give me a reason as to why I shouldn't kill you."

Rather than being met with a response, the stinging sound of silence boiled a rage that slumbered at the core of his soul. He shoved Pin's body further against the tree, watching her writhe at the growing pressure on her back.

"COME ON!" His shout broke through gritted teeth. "I BEGGED FOR MY LIFE- DO SOMETHING! ANYTHING! I WON'T HESITATE TO KILL YOU-AND YOU KNOW THAT!"

"I know. You don't like it, huh."

Pin's words take Fries back. "LIKE WHAT," he snapped.

"Not begging for my life... trust me. I was in your shoes at one point."

He struggled to contain any composure; from the way his hand trembled, tightening around the rock as it pressed deeper into Pin's throat. She swore she could feel the layers of her flesh tearing so painfully slow, but it didn't matter.

She didn't matter.

"Do it..." Pin whispered, "..If you want to kill me.. just do it. It's in your hands now. I am done running."

Her eyebrows furrowed as she watched Fries's lips tighten. What was he waiting for?

"It's what she wants... for all of us to go insane..." Her eyes dim as memories rose from the shallow grave of her mind. "...To kill each

other... Using nothing but our weaknesses against us. You'll kill me... and then you'll kill Coiny... you'll claim that your anger was the reason... and what's next?" She stared at his trembling hand. "Nothing.. Just a cursed cycle, where we all die by each other's hands. And no matter what it will never stop- she will never stop. She'll wait, until we all drop like flies. One.. by. One."

Words that poured endlessly out of her mouth. While she didn't want to feel the harsh embrace of death once more, she couldn't find any reason for her to stay. But it only fueled the flames of chaos, as Fries was already digging the stone deeper into her throat. She could hear Coiny yelling out in fear, only for Fries to shoot him another nasty glare. But even as she was flinching at the swelling pressure at her throat, she continued. "We used to be friends.. why can't you see that..?"

"I would be able to see clearly, if it weren't for all of the blood on your hands," he snapped. "Because of you, I've had to deal with countless nightmares of everybody I knew dying right in front of me. Because of YOU.... I can't find myself trusting anybody- because all that ever came out of that mouth of yours was LIES."

Oh. How his words stung like the flames of hell. With a sharp inhale, Fries was preparing to drive the damned rock through Pin's throat, until she spoke again.

"Do you want the truth?" she uttered, her eyes narrowing towards him. "Here- why don't I show it to you."

"Wh-"

One swing, and her knee drove straight into Fries's stomach. A grunt found its way through his hollowed throat, and when his hand sank from her throat, Pin tackled Fries to the ground. Coiny stepped back in shock, but he forced himself to run towards the two, grabbing at Fries's arms.

"W-What are we going to do?!" the coin creature asked with a quivering voice. "He could tell everyone!"

Pin shook her head. "I won't let him."

"How?!"

Silence. Ignoring the foul words that spewed from Fries's tongue, Pin looked to the side, snatching the stone that the object had threatened her with.

"It might take some convincing.." Pin found herself whispering. Horrified, Coiny shook his head, unable to try and let the scene play out before him.

"No- y-you can't Pin! There's got to be another way!"

"Do you think he'll listen?"

...

Any remaining scream of defiance had been knocked free from Fries's lungs, and she raised the stone, preparing to bring it down with all of her might. Anger fizzed into a blinding panic, as Fries now thrashed beneath the two, desperately trying to escape the damned fate that awaited him.

It was only when her eyes caught onto the shimmering surface of his watering eyes that made her blood run cold. It took an incredulous amount of effort to try and make the poor guy cry, yet seeing the way his body trembled, with his eyes now flooding with tears of pure terror made Pin's blood run cold.

The bitterness of the past trickled down her mind, and for a second, she found herself back in that garden.

That cave.

The day where it all went downhill.

"B-Back to your old ways, huh..?!" Fries hissed, sorrow radiating through his aching throat. "What... you're just going to kill me again..!? Nice change you've made here.. Pin."

Fear struck her back like a lightning bolt. Instantly, the rock slipped free from her hands as she frantically hopped off of Fries's body, now terrified of hurting him like she had before. With her now freeing

him, and with Coiny's hands loosening from Fries's wrists, he drove his fist straight into Coiny's jaw, sending him backwards as he cried out in pain. He wasted no time, immediately turning and shoving the thumbtack back to the ground, forcing her head into the purple grass beneath them as he grabbed the stone.

"So much for your truths," he snapped, feeling her body crumble beneath his. "Any other lies you have up your sleeve..?!"

"..I hate you."

Hate. Blinking, Fries glanced down at Pin, his eyebrow tilting upwards. "..What."

"I hate all of you," Pin murmured through gritted teeth. "But you.. I hate you so much, sometimes I hope you drop dead. I... I'm sorry, but what more can I say- you guys didn't think you were the only ones who had nightmares, did you?

Fries's eyes narrowed. "Why would you have any nightmares? You were the monster here- you had no reason to be afraid."

"You wouldn't understand."

Pressing her head forcefully against the soil, Pin's eyes squeezed shut in discomfort as Fries's confusion sparked into anger. "Understand?!" he shouted. "You had no reason to kill us!"

"No reason?! I have so many reasons, they wouldn't be able to fit on every finger on ALL OF OUR HANDS COMBINED," Pin yelled. No longer caring about her own life, the unbridled rage that she thought she had lost so long ago, now bloomed like the first rose of spring, its petals of wrath unfurling and releasing its rage through every corner of Pin's soul. Slowly, she struggled in Fries's hold, trying to get him off as he glared down at her in disbelief.

"Excuse me?!" he snapped. "Back at it with the hand jokes, ARE YOU."

Pin laughed. "You all saw me as a joke."

"I SAW YOU AS A FRIEND, PIN!"

"Then why didn't you stop it?!"

"Stop WHAT."

Perhaps, if their circumstances had been different, Pin could've shared everything that happened to her. From the nightmares, to the wretched voice of Scarlet herself, her reasons would find themselves to ears that, for once, listened to her, and understood the conflict she was imprisoned in.

But when her mouth opened, a faint whisper brushed against the back of her mind. And Evil Leafy's figure flashed through the trees in the distance.

'I wouldn't say anything if I were you.'

'Remember. Keep Scarlet's existence hidden. Keep my plans away. And WE make sure they remain untouched.'

'You tell them... and we make sure they never come back.'

Never.

Never...

"Please," Pin whispered, fighting the tears that stung at the center of her eyes. "I-..I just.. want it all to stop.."

Fries rolled his eyes. "Oh don't start with that. I know what you're trying to do- and it's NOT GOING TO WORK-"

"You could've prevented this."

"ENOUGH WITH THE GUESSING GAMES PIN! BE SPECIFIC FOR ONCE!"

Specificity? Fine. She'd offer it. A deep scowl stretched across her scarred face, her voice snapping like the claws of a crustacean that had climbed from the deepest pits of hell.

"Don't you remember? BFDIA? The season everybody fawns over, the times that everyone can enjoy recalling?"

There were a plethora of topics that the thumbtack might have brought up. Practically anything else to try and structure a poor excuse for her actions. But hearing the name of the game show crushed the remaining patience in Fries. "Not this again Pin," he grunted, "We were just-"

"You could've stopped it. Anyone could've, really. Throughout the entire season, I was mistreated in one way or another- having limbs removed was one thing, but oh, that's when my face was taken away from me!"

Her laughter filled the forest that surrounded them. Such a broken laugh, it sent a wave of discomfort to the boys that stood beside Pin, taking in the words she had kept hidden for quite some time.

Coiny carefully reached for her, placing a hand on hers to try and soothe the emotions that erupted from her soul. "Pin..-"

"And then?! Hah, my entire SIZE! MY BODY!"

"IT WAS ALL FOR THE GAME, PIN!" Fries shouted, his hand lifting from her wrists as he slapped it over his head. "I- We had no idea!

"I DON'T CARE ABOUT THE GAME, FRIES! NOT NOW, AND NOT ANYMORE! Despite pushing myself through that god forsaken season, I STILL WANTED- NO, PRAYED- FOR SOMEBODY, ANYBODY TO STOP THE HELL THAT I WAS FORCED TO LIVE THROUGH. Maybe you saw me with a smile on my face, but I knew so LITTLE about what was to come. I was a fool- an idiot. Heh- even when Needle recovered me, she was thrilled that the recovery of my inanimate form meant less cranking for her! How considerate! How... revealing."

How long had it been since Pin allowed herself to be angry? That, she didn't know. But it had been quite some time since she felt the relief of letting these emotions slip free from the chamber that was locked away, hidden in the shadows of shame that remained in every crevice of her mind. She caught her breath, her hands pricking at her arms as Coiny carefully pulled her away.

"Pin.." he whispered, caressing the side of her face. "Hey... I'm here.."

"..Do you remember that day, Coiny?" she questioned hoarsely. "When I finally managed to reach out to you?"

The day he went to the center of the Earth for Pin. Why, the memory drew out a faint chuckle from him. "How could I forget..? After all that time- hearing your voice, it was like-"

"That day when our efforts were for nothing."

"I-.. what..?" Confused, Coiny turned to face the thumbtack he had grown to love again. But for the first time, her gaze didn't meet his- instead, they were locked into dead air, staring straight ahead... almost like.. "Pin..?"

"Despite everything we tried to do- our work to undo the fate that I was trapped in- it was all for naught."

"But we-"

"Coiny, you and I went to the DEPTHS OF THE EARTH to get my old self back!"

"I-I know!"

"And when you brought me back- it was almost like looking at Heaven itself- I-I finally had a sense of my limbs, my face, everything that I had lost was at the reach of my fingertips! I was at the doorstep of the reality that I had taken for granted, and with you pulling me up to freedom, I felt my anger falling back into the Hell I was trapped in. I was ready to grow, to change, to appreciate the little things that I didn't care to think about- that sense of normalcy was right IN FRONT OF ME! But then.. it was lost. Gone. Forced back into the prison of my own, useless body. They had taken everything from me... and it was right then and there when I lost the last bit of hope I had."

The words spilled like a broken faucet, her words flooding the forest as all eyes were locked on her. This was beyond Scarlet and Evil Leafy, beyond everything that had happened. It was what fueled her when that damned trowel was in her hands.

An anger that was brought back, ten fold.

Now, Fries was at a loss for words. The anger that once drowned him from any sympathy simmered into something unfathomably foreign, he never imagined he'd come to feel it towards her.

Guilt.

"Pin.. you know I would've helped you, I.. it was just-"

"-Yes yes, I know. The game," Pin snapped, his words shutting into dead silence. "Always the game... and never about me."

Fries scowled. "That's not what I meant. And you know that," he said.

"I wish I could believe you, Fries. But nobody helped- NOBODY- except for Coiny. It was always Coiny who considered me, who listened to my thoughts and offered me the freedom to make my own choices... but in the end, it was only him. And even he reached his limit, the very day I killed you. He... he chose to kill himself.. rather than try and help."

Fries's eyes widened, and as he immediately turned to face Coiny, he watched as the coin-creature's hand clutched the damned scar on his chest, his copper-colored eyes turning down in shame.

"That was because I didn't know, Pin," he whispered.

And he was right. He didn't. None of them would ever have the chance to know what she had gone through.

What she was forced to do.

Because now she was banished, exiled into the reality that she knew she deserved. But, she'd admit, it was selfish of her to crave the normalcy that once was the past. She wished she was back in the city, freed from the shackles of her sins and left to enjoy her existence with the people she cared deeply for.

To this day, she wondered how they were all holding up after everything. After the fire. After her murders.

But she had to let go.

"..I went through so much in BFDIA. And then when we came to Yoyle City..? I thought it'd be a fresh start- a chance for me to leave all of this behind. But then the nightmares happened.. my sleep paralysis.. and even then.. I was brushed aside. Told that it would only happen once, and never again. From the beginning, everybody was against me- I was kidnapped and locked in Freesmart's basement for DAYS, and it took you all SO LONG to try and find where I was! Hah, was anybody even looking?! Were you even looking for me, Fries?! Did *you* even notice that I was GONE?!"

The song of silence was a melody that Pin had grown quite sick of. Even as she noticed Fries's baffled expression, she mentally sorted through the reasons as to why he should let her live.

But there was nothing.

Perhaps death could treat her kinder than the brute that was reality.

....

No.

The eyes of the two she had come to care for stay tight on her, as she let her hands lower from her neck. She grabbed Fries's hand and shoved the rock against it, pressing it against her skin as she didn't break the eye contact she had.

"I am not what you make of me, Fries. I'm more than what everybody says. For my entire life, I was treated like some sort of joke- my existence in this show was a running gag to everybody around me. I know what I did was unforgivable- I wish I could take back all of the pain that I had caused, and I wished it could have somehow brought us all closer- but what's done, is done. There's no saving me now... there never was."

Feeling Coiny's hands clinging onto hers, she pulled away, letting herself settle in front of Fries.

"If you want to kill me... do it. Make it quick. But when it all happens again- and believe me.. it *will* happen again.. I only want you to remember the feeling of my blood on your hands. Maybe it will be as

permanent and haunting as your blood is, on mine."

"Pin..?" Coiny replied, confused at her words. Instinctively, he took a step towards her direction, his hands fumbling to try and pull her away from Fries's path.

Fries stood over the two. And his confusion burst into panic.

Whilst the sun helped the brilliant hue of the Yoyle Forest pop into life, Pin only had a moment to see Fries's rock hurling towards her, and her eyes shut tightly, the world going black in her final moments.

She didn't have the chance to make a noise.

The sky.

All anybody can see here is the sky.

It's hard to breathe. I can't. There's too many sensations for me to point out, but the only thing I can feel is betrayal.

I was happy.

Everything I had asked for had come to fruition. It came to be.

My girlfriends. They saw me. They finally noticed me and they told me that they loved me.

Was that too much to ask for? Was it an unforgivable sin to want to be seen, for once in my life?

I feel things crawling around. Chewing through my pages. Burrowing in the flesh of my throat. I think they're eating through my tongue.

It hurts.

We can hear each other.

I remember how hard Saw cried when she saw me.

But the others... quiet.. Too quiet.

Saw... can you hear me?

.....

I helped paint you. I helped give you your periwinkality... and when you asked me how it looked... all I could think was so.. You.

You were my world... my everything.. Do you remember that day? Can you remember it? Even through this pain, I can. I hope I still can.. it's getting hard to.. Remember..

...

She wishes she could hear Gaty. But she's resting with the maggots now.

My friends.

Balloony cannot speak. Neither can Snowball.

I know.

Blocky...

..Is she near.

I hope not... how has he-

He hasn't said a word. But I can't care anymore. This pain. It's... I..

I know, Blocky.

...

Grassy keeps telling me he's safe.

Safe..? He was as silent as can be..

Not all the time. I still.. I can still hear him crying too. Listen.

Blocky-

Listen.

...

M-Ma.. ma...

...

Sa..fe.. home... safe...

...

Don't tell me he's-

He says.. We are home.

...

Tree says we are home. Book.. is this home. Is this safety. I thought I'd hear him asking for Bottle.. But no..

No.

Sometimes I hear him.. Singing. Grassy usually goes quiet when he hums.

Blocky...

Book.

Please. We can't... we can't give in.

This pain is the only thing we will ever come to know.

Blocky..

Just ask Tree. Oh wait... I don't think we can. All he does is smile now.

I remember seeing that.

He's saying the same thing. Safety. Home.

Home...

...

Oh.

She's drawing near.

She's back.

SHE'S BACK.

Please don't make me go back to the silence.

Please don't make me go.

Please.

Please.

Bubble.

Can you see us now..?

I'm back...

Every time she steps into the garden, Bubble loses track of time. She stayed until the stars made their presence known, the quiet winds of the afternoon creeping through hushed leaves that attempted to block the damning sight around them.

She didn't want to come back. Not after the sins she had committed. All she wanted was to stay in the clubhouse, with Fanny by her side, and help the friends she held so near and dear to her heart. But Scarlet had other plans, and she had to return to gather what she needed.

Maybe it wasn't Scarlet's doing. For the urge to see her grew with every passing second, but when could Bubble ever tell when a thought was of her own?

Today, the usual groans and wheezing fell quiet. It was worse when she carried the two new corpses into her garden; Blocky's welcome filled the garden with a sound that Bubble hadn't heard in quite a while.

His blood may have never stopped, but when Grassy noticed his second father being dragged in as a mangled, bloody mess, his screams returned, accompanied by the hollowed wails that could make any object crumble. Poor thing still didn't grasp the realization of his missing hands, as he reached for the wooden block, wailing intelligible nonsense to try and get his attention.

This resulted in Blocky trying to thrash out of Bubble's grip with whatever remaining strength he had. Bubble had to swallow the nausea that swelled in her stomach, as the nauseating wheezes broke through his open face, his jaw twitching with every noise that erupted from him.

Maybe he tried to force her to put him by his son's side. Or maybe he realized that this was where his son had been, with a fate that was left for him to imagine.

After all, he couldn't see. His imagination, alongside Grassy's cries, were enough to make him fear for the state of his kid.

Bubble watched as Blocky's stump twisted, brushing against Snowball's ever so gently. Not like he knew it was him who was doomed to that spot anyways.

One could tell Snowball and Blocky were meant to be. The flowers they both grew intertwined with one another, red tulips and snowdrops sharing their auras together.

It's a shame they couldn't make the other out, though.

She took her time when it came to Blocky's spot; finally having the chance to sharpen her trowel, he now sat limbless, right in between Grassy and Snowball. So far, the flowers that bloomed from the family filled the metallic bubble with ease, a sweetened scent overpowering the damning smell of death that surrounded her.

It kept her here. That small piece of her soul- stitched to a world that she was quickly losing her grip on.

Walking past the three, she approached a familiar rose bush, right before she knelt down. She takes a second to compose herself, as her voice warbles when she tells the object, "You're going to be okay."

The familiar sight of green and blue brought tears to Bubble's eyes. She lingered when she carefully embraced Book's body, her lip quivering as she still felt the warmth from her friend's body.

Despite her commands, Bubble wanted to give Book one of the more comforting spots in the garden. A small patch where epiphyllums grew, and a fragment of the sky pierced through the darkness, letting her gain the ethereal hugs from the sun's rays.

It unfortunately didn't spare her; for Bubble forced herself through cutting her arms and legs off. Her hands now bloomed with Saw's, and the bed of epiphyllums began to snake around the guidebook's body, keeping her a part of, what she once saw as, her friend's creation.

Bubble wanted to keep it that way. But that's when she blanked out,

and upon her own return, she noticed the anchoring nails that pierced through Book's spine. It kept her body straightened upwards, and her innards steamed from its exposure within the air- until they twitched.

'I always thought her scraps would do good for the garden... but I think she works better off as a tombstone. Dont'cha think, dear?~'

As much as she wished she could roll her eyes, she held back. Her heart was met with another wave of grief as a disgusting gargle oozed from Book's mouth, and this now left her in the spotlight of their tragic waltz. She had to say something. Anything.

But what was there to say..? She gave her up. Threw her aside as if she were nothing.

Two times in a row...

...

"A-Are we still froinds, Book..?" Bubble whispered under her breath. Her eyes peeked into Book's gutted throat, her flesh twitching and throat opening and closing with every breath she took.

To her dismay, Bubble's arms slipped free as a few bugs crawled from the exposed flesh, covered in pieces of Book's pages. Others slithered out, with blood dripping from their legs before slinking right back into her wound.

She's still warm. A warmth that flooded Bubble's mind with the memories of the past, when they had both endured the hell of Scarlet's first massacre. She told herself that no matter what, she wouldn't put Book through that nightmare ever again. Even if Scarlet chose her, she'd find a way to keep her safe, to keep her from ever getting hurt.

...But here she was.

Wrong.

Bubble straightened herself out, drawing in careful breaths to wash away the grief that creeped in her chest. She could only muster up

the strength to give her friend one last look, before trailing away from the garden, disappearing into the darkened void of the forest.

Screams of terror begin to flood through the lab.

Some grief found its way out of their vocal chords, but for others, it drowned any possible noise that they wished to make- for they are silenced by the daunting fear that has paralyzed their aching souls.

Trembling in place, Golf Ball found herself repeating the words over and over. Unable to scream, or plead for her safety, it came out like a broken record:

It's happening again.

Even if she were to scream, would anyone be able to hear it? The pain that comes hand in hand with the responsibility of looking after every individual in the city? She wished she could tell, especially as the uproar continued throughout the room she stood in.

Frantic questions and plans of actions unraveled left and right.

"W-We need to RUN!!" Gelatin shouted, biting at his nails as he pressed his back against the wall. "We can't STAY HERE!"

"Oh yeah?! Look at what happened to us when WE said the same thing!" Even from a distance away, Bomby was quick to snap back at him, desperately clinging onto his own wrists.

"You guys weren't even HERE!!"

"And when we came back, S-SHE-"

"We're all going to die again.." Nickel's panicked laughter cut Bomby's

words into silence. Shocked, the bomb quickly held the coin in a tight embrace, shutting his eyes tightly as if he were attempting to wake from a dreaded nightmare he had experienced, over and over again.

Yet, with one blink, he was still here. All of them were. Their words buzzed with maniacal terror, with Spongy demanding that they find a way to capture whoever was doing these killings, and Woody's gibberish pleading for his own life.

Bottle had to fight through her own grief to try and alleviate him. After all, she and Pie were the first to offer a helping hand to him; they helped him grow from the scars he had, and found ways to deal with the anxiety that he faced a constant battle with.

But now, she realized all of her time spent searching was for naught. She never believed that Tree would simply up and leave the city without a proper goodbye, and although the glass bottle knew it was a selfish afterthought, she wished that could've been the case.

Anything would've been better than the reality that hit now.

When Pie noticed Bottle's trembling, she tried to pull her aside, but her hands were shaken off of her. The questions and demands continued.

"What are we going to do?!" screamed Needle.

"We HIDE! What else is there to do?!" Cloudy shouted.

"We've tried hiding once- w-we won't EVER DO IT AGAIN!" Pencil interjected.

Not one question carried any concern for the names that had fallen into the bloodied soil below. The victims.

Their friends. Their family.

Family.

Oh.

Snapping free from her feared trance, the sports ball turned to try

and find the sight of her own family. It didn't take her a second for her eyes to find Rocky, who was carefully climbing into Basketball's embrace, desperately trying to soothe his sobbing aunt.

It made Golf Ball's heart sink. He shouldn't have been here- how she wished he could've stayed in his room. Every step she took towards the two dragged her deeper into the quicksands of regret- from the fights she had with Basketball, to the distance she had forced between Rocky and Tennis Ball.

Nothing would be able to take that back. But she had to do something.

Anything.

She didn't want to realize her love in the very last moments of her life.

But that's when she passes the table. Crayons and paper were scattered amongst its surface, with Rocky's drawings covering the blinding whites of the sheets. She couldn't stop herself from looking down, to see what the little one had been up to before the news revealed itself.

Rocky's drawing of her with a hero's cape was the final stone that shattered her guilt-ridden heart.

For she brought no salvation.

His missing leg was enough to prove it. As well as those recalled medicine bottles that sit in a damned box, in the far corner of the room.

All the while, Basketball was unable to take in a proper breath. Panic forced the sobs free from her burning lungs, and her body shook too wildly for her to hold Grass-

No.

No, no.

No.

She didn't want to think. How she wished she could tune out from the prison of her own mind.

Her son.

Her girlfriend.

Gone.

All because of a cycle she had pushed away from the start.

"I-.. I shouldn't have let them go.." were the only words that Basketball managed to speak, before her sobs broke through the weakened barriers of her own heart. Through her snivels, she felt Rocky nudging against her, letting her rest her tear-coated face against the top of his head.

Yet, it was a gesture like this that made Golf Ball's attitude return. She rushed towards the two, trying to pull the little one away from Basketball's sickly self.

"Rocky- why on EARTH are you doing that?!" she scolded. "Don't you see that we're in a serious situation?! You shouldn't even be near-"

"Basketball needs help too," Rocky demanded, "...Grassy always told me to be helpful. I want to help now."

Maybe Rocky didn't know how to process the news. Maybe he was doing so to keep himself from panicking, from causing any more stress to the objects around him. But no matter how hard he tried to keep himself cool, tears trickled down his face as the faint image of Grassy flickered through his mind.

There was something damning about the way Rocky acted. From what she could remember, he was never one to put ANY effort into the plans that she had made. Hell, she recalled the very moment where he kicked Tennis Ball away- simply because he scolded him for not knowing how to write! Come on. They both made it work. He had to as well. Yet, watching as the shorter one quietly eased Basketball's sobs was nothing short of foreign to her.

After everything- the nightmares, the trauma, the reminders of what

would never go away- it was supposed to be him who received the comfort. He now knew that this damn cycle was repeating all over again, and from the look in his eyes, Golf Ball knew that he pieced Grassy's disappearance together.

But despite the fear in his eyes, he gently pressed himself against Basketball, a soft squeak emitting from his throat as the sports ball held him tightly in her grasp. It was silly... she held onto Grassy a little tightly like that, yet he had still fallen from her hold.

It was in Golf Ball's nature to get her family back to her feet. This was no time for tears, as there were objects who needed their help out there. Hell, she was close to berating her prima for bawling so loudly, but with every wail that crashed upon her 'ears,' it washed a haunting familiarity that she had desperately tried to forget.

When Golf Ball lost Rocky, she didn't find herself breaking at the mere news. It struck her more as time went on, and the grief that crushed the smaller scientist was something so daunting, that she was sure it would never leave her psyche. She knew. And from how it was all taking place.. Golf Ball couldn't imagine what the little guy was suffering through.

"G-Golf Ball," Tennis Ball's voice interrupted her thoughts. "How are we going to-"

Small steps led Golf Ball away from her lover. Confused, he watched as she approached his cousin, staring at her with an expression that was far too little for him to decipher. It took Basketball a few seconds, pathetically wiping her tears as her eyes glanced towards the scientists direction. But what threw her off was when GB gave her a nudge, 'hugging' her as tightly as she could.

And Tennis Ball swore, he could hear a faint apology brushing past her lips. Brushing past the group, he quietly sat beside his family, pulling them in for a close 'embrace'.

But not everybody had the same reactions.

"That's it," Needle's voice caught the scientists off guard. Turning, they watched as the taller object cracked her knuckles, angrily

wiping the tears that dripped down her petrified face. "I'm not waiting around anymore- We have to DO SOMETHING!"

"What CAN we do?!" Match shrieked. "No matter what we tried, we-w-we were all-"

"That was LAST TIME, MATCH. I've had it up to HERE with this nightmare- whoever's doing this again is going to GET IT!"

"But it CAN'T be happening again!" Taco interrupted, rushing in between the two. "L-Look, I know we're all worried- but what if it's a coincidence?!"

"A COINCIDENCE?! TELL THAT TO MY SCARS, TACO!"

"N-NO, NO! I don't mean it like that- but what if it's something else?! Golf Ball could have easily misplaced her Yoylite- o-or Grassy could have taken it with him!"

"Negatory," Golf Ball uttered, glaring back towards the taco, "There's only a 3.265 percent chance of my own misplacement of such a prized possession. That fragment stayed in that display case for as long as I can remember."

"And how good are you at remembering?" Lollipop snapped. "Just from your Zelatonin mishap, I find it hard to believe that you DIDN'T misplace it."

"Look, I can't apologize enough for the mishap of my own creation. But right now we have a bigger problem in our wake!"

"But what if Taco's right?!"

"Yeah, what IF she's right?!" Firey shouted, carefully helping Leafy back onto her feet. "You could've misplaced the Yoylite GB- why are we assuming that there's someone out there killing people?!"

At his words, everybody turned to stare at the metallic flame in disbelief. Leafy shakily tried to break free from his hold, too shocked to process the words that had left his mouth. "Firey..-"

"NO! Come on, are we just going to assume that somebody's out there

killing again?! We can't have this be a mess like last time!"

"But this was EXACTLY how it started, Firey!" The sound of Ice Cube's voice made everybody turn. "When you died, we thought it was an accident! Then Rocky, then Woody- then-"

"Me," Flower interrupted, a scornful glare radiating from her as she held Ruby close.

Being reminded of everything before ripped a new wound into Basketball. She found herself glancing at Bottle, who, in return, was staring right back at her in disbelief.

She couldn't possibly imagine what was going through her mind. And with the illness that riddled through her body, she lost the remaining strength to keep herself calm as a ball of sorrow crashed against her. "A-And I pushed it all aside..." Basketball sobbed. "I knew it from the start.."

Speechless.

Shivering, Ice Cube stood speechless until the realization sank in. To think, they had come by to ensure the safety of her two closest friends, expecting for the day to end with all of them safe in the clubhouse. Heck, she would've been just fine sleeping outside- for she'd have the knowledge that her two closest friends were back home safe.

She should have known better.

Pencil took Match's hands, her thumb caressing the back of them as she shouted over the panic. But her words slipped through one ear, and out the other, as Ice Cube trailed away from the group.

Bracelety was the first to notice. Confused, she reached for her, frowning as her voice stammered out, "Icy..? Icy, what are you-"

"I NEED TO THROW UP!"

Dashing out of the lab, Ice Cube's teeth clenched together as a nauseating feeling swirled in the center of her stomach. Panic seared through her body, fueling her legs to run as fast as objectly (like.

Humanly. yeah.) possible. There were faces old and new around her, but it wasn't like she cared.

She couldn't. Not after the news she had learned.

"I'M NOT DOING THIS AGAIN!" she shouted.

Her lungs burned as she zipped past Barf Bag, who, coincidentally, slammed right into Donut. A grunt broke past his mouth before his eyes snapped towards the little block of ice, narrowing with annoyance.

"HEY!" he yelled. "WATCH WHERE YOU'RE-"

"WE'RE ALL GOING TO DIE AGAIN!"

Ice Cube zipped by, causing Pen to jump to the side in shock. "WH-SERIOUSLY?!"

"RUN!!" was all Ice Cube could say, and just as quickly as she had appeared, she was out of sight, turning into a corner and running off into the other direction. Pen, who was walking alongside Eraser, stood in plain confusion before shrugging his concern off.

After the smoothie visit, Pen had offered to visit Blocky as much as he could, not wanting to leave him alone with the grief that clouded his friend's line of sight. And, much to Eraser's surprise, he had agreed- inviting the two to come by today for something fun (once he got some proper rest, of course).

So here he was, cradling a few movie CD's in one arm, and a box of popcorn in the other. He had his usual smile that beamed from his face, and Eraser looked up, placing a hand on his boyfriend's shoulder.

"Do you think he'll be up for a movie night, Pen..?" he asked.

"Of course!! Seemed like he got some good sleep yesterday- I can feel it!" answered Pen, whose smile only continued to gleam. "Besides, our company's helping him feel better. You saw the way he smiled when we made our smoothies!"

"..It has been a while since he's smiled at all.."

"Exactly! And I got just the movies for the coolest movie night we could EVER do!"

"Please tell me it isn't-"

"GUYS!"

Their conversation was cut short. Turning, the two were greeted with the sight of Basketball, who was quickly catching up with a hoarse cough breaking past her throat.

"Huh? Oh, hey Basket- WOAH. What happened to you?!"

"What's with all the red spots..?" Eraser uttered, taking a hesitant step away from her.

Basketball ignored the gesture, shaking her head as she looked around with concern. "It doesn't matter. Have you seen Blocky?!"

"We're actually going to his place right now.."

"Perfect!" she exclaimed. "LETS GO."

Silence. The two boys stood still as she scrambled away, simply exchanging a look of pure confusion before she stomped back.

"MOVE IT, YOU TWO."

Immediately, the two obediently followed her demands, and Blocky's house soon came into view. Stepping up the stairs that led to the door, she found her mind trailing away- the grief and illness now sending a numbing static through her veins.

It was enough for Pen to catch on. "Are you sure you're feeling okay, Bee-Ball? I know you've been under the weather lately.." he asked.

"I'm fine. We just.." She drew in a deep breath, stifling a cough through her words. "..have to get Blocky."

Carefully stepping into Blocky's home, Pen couldn't help but stare at

the dots that covered Basketball's body. The scientist was quick to shoot him a glare.

"Do you mind," she uttered.

"Gah- I'm sorry! It's just.. gosh.. it looks like that's really going to leave a mark there.."

"Why don't you stop talking. I don't think I want to lose any more brain cells at this rate."

"Sorry," Pen murmured shamefully.

Behind him, Eraser closed the door and flicked the light switch on. The three slowly made their way through the living room, noting the disheveled state that it had been left in.

"Jeez," Pen uttered, carefully picking up the empty first aid kit from the ground. "Didn't we help him clean the place up..?"

"We did," Eraser whispered with a frown. "...Blocky?"
No response. Worriedly, Basketball found herself trailing to the kitchen, with the two taking her every move.

"Blocky," she called, wincing at the stench that slapped against her nostrils. "Are you-"

The first aid kit fell free from Pen's hands when the blood came to their sights. From the pieces of flesh that were scattered on the ground, to the shards of glass that laid piled on the broken blender, the frigid atmosphere soon filled with the unrecognizable sound of their own screams.

The sounds of Basketball's screams didn't bring Ice Cube back to reality. She continued to run. Not caring that Freesmart was chasing after her, nor for Bracelety, begging her to stay.

All she felt was the overwhelming dread, taunting her, reminding her that her time was-

WHAM.

Ice Cube's thoughts were knocked free from her mind as she ran into the object with full force. Adrenaline shot through her like an arrow of the past, and she scrambled back, shrieking out in terror. Only this time, her shrieks didn't last too long, as her eyes soon met the gaze of the one that had been by her side, through thick and thin.

Bubble.

"Bubb..le..?" Ice Cube wheezed, unable to stop her body from quivering. The metallic soap bubble held her bandaged wounds, and when her eyes trailed to her hands, the voices from the objects she had come to know filled her 'ears'.

"ICY!!!!"

"Wait..."

"No, is that-"

"BUBBLE."

Maybe if she hadn't been tuned out, Bubble's reaction could have been something different. Usually she'd spring at the sound of Fanny's voice, but after everything she endured, her head slowly tilted towards her direction, noting the stream of tears that rushed down her girlfriend's face. For a moment, the world stood still as the two stared at one another, until Fanny stormed towards her direction, throwing her tail around her and tugging her into a tight hug.

"DAMN YOU!" Fanny screamed, repeating the phrase over and over. "Y-You scared me- and I HATE BEING SCARED!"

Despite her words, Fanny sunk into Bubble's arms, her sobs now muffled through her metal chest. "D-Damn you..."

To say that Bubble was relieved was a mere understatement. With a weakened smile, she kissed Fanny's forehead, powering through the aching grief as she held her girlfriend tight.

"O-Oi love you too.."

With this reunion, came many others. The rest of the group went out of their way to try and gather those who weren't aware of the situation, warning them of the terrors that were yet to come. Despite Lollipop trying to calm him, Gelatin sprinted back home to try and warn Fries about the news. Leafy, who was now grounding herself, was slowly pulling a knife out from her back, desperately clutching it with her life.

Now, Firey was used to her methods of defense- he knew how much she had to adapt to when she was forced to survive in the forest- but he didn't expect her to turn towards him, being given a look that reminded him of the night of his own nightmare.

"L-Leafy," he stuttered, "What are you-"

"We don't know who to trust. We have to be careful." The tone of her voice had reduced to a low, menacing hum, her eyes shifting towards the others with fear shimmering beneath the surface. "I can't risk failing again."

"F-Failing..?"

"I'm getting whoever's responsible for this. One way or-"

"FRIES!!"

With one reunion, came another. As Fries silently walked towards the group, he dragged the silent coin creature with him, anger steaming from his very surface. There was something about Coiny's poise that made the others stare withheld breaths, but the tears that crawled down his pale face were enough to comfort them from the possibility.

The possibility of...

"A-Are we really going to die again."

Ruby's voice caught Flower's attention. Quickly, she knelt down, hugging the gemstone as tightly as she could. "No," was all she could say, her eyes immediately finding their way towards Bubble.

Whilst the poor thing practically clung onto Fanny, her eyes locked onto the piece of red fabric that screamed familiarities towards her.

Flower's arms began to loosen from the hug, and when Ruby turned to see what she had been staring at, her heart sank to the bottom of the Earth.

"Bubble..?" Ruby's words snapped Bubble free from her trance, forcing her to look away from her girlfriend and straight at the reality that she had caused.

"Ruby.."

"Where's Book..?"

'Oh dear. Remember my advice, dear..~'

"..Oi couldn't- save her." Bubble choked through her tears, her hand clenching on the bookmark that Book had once worn. "Oi'm sorry.."

"DID YOU SEE WHO-"

"Oi d-don't know... OI DON'T KNOW! Oi troied to run away, b-but.. she.. s-she.."

"What do you MEAN?!" Flower roared through her tears. "You're telling me you couldn't SEE WHO IT WAS?!"

"OIT WAS DARK!"

"She's right." Fries interjected, stepping in between the two. "That forest gets dark enough to throw anybody off."

"And how do you know that, salt-sticks?!"

"..I just got back from the place."

'As I've heard... We might need some time to come up with a plan, my dear.'

But won't everybody be onto me..?

'Do you see anybody being suspicious..?'

...I...

'I suppose it's one of the advantages of being so 'weak' to the others. It only means that you're on the bottom of their list...'

Oh..

"I-..Is that.." Ruby's voice cracked through Bubble's mind, her gaze trailing towards the tethered bookmark. With a solemn nod, the metallic soap bubble shakily held out the last remaining fragment of her- the only remaining piece that would ever remain of Ruby and Flower's girlfriend. And the poor gemstone couldn't stop the sudden shriek of guilt that shattered past her aching throat.

But the wails of her teammates weren't enough to break her away from the guilt. Even as Fanny carefully brushed her plug tail into Bubble's palm, she couldn't help but pull away, ignoring the pained look that the electrical fan gave her.

It's funny. When Book found Ruby's shards so long ago, her scream reverberated through all of Yoyle City, convincing her of her friends' demise.

Now, Ruby was cradling a piece of Book. And even if she was cracking from her own screams of pain, Bubble's mind became absorbed by the static that seared through her body, deafening her from the world she stood present in.

'Don't fret it, darling,' Scarlet whispered. *'For it's nothing new~.'*

Despite Bubble's frozen state, Needle stomped towards the group, her hands now clenched tightly into fists.

"Ugh- We can't just stay afraid here!" she shouted. "We have to try and come up with a plan!"

"WHAT MORE CAN WE DO?!" Bracelety cried out, gently helping Ice Cube up from the ground. "H-HOW DID YOU GUYS HANDLE THIS LAST TIME?!"

"We all died," Bubble uttered weakly, forcing a panicked cry from Ice Cube. Not hesitating to comfort her girlfriend, Bracelety pouted at Bubble's attitude, gently helping her settle from the panic that quaked through her.

Even with the serene scene that played out, Needle couldn't help but shake her head, tossing a glance towards Teardrop, who was angrily pacing back and forth as she tried to collect her thoughts.

"...We aren't dying," Needle's voice boomed through the air. "Not this time."

"B-But how...?" Flower sniveled.

"We investigate."

With a quick glance, Needle found Pencil as she stepped towards the center of the group, silently adjusting the scarf that was tied over her neck. Confused, Needle tried to speak, but Match stumbled after her, rubbing the back of her own head.

"Pence-Pence..?" she whispered. "What are you-"

"No matter what anybody says- we know there's someone out there doing these killings again," Pencil stated, turning to face the others. "I remember when it was happening for the first time, we managed to catch Pin and keep her locked up for a good while."

"And we were stupid enough to not realize it was her.." Ice Cube murmured, much to Bracelety's dismay.

"ICY- Y-YOU WEREN'T-"

"We WERE!"

"SO AS I WAS SAYING," Pencil shouted over the two, who cowered beneath her as they held onto one another, "We can throw another investigation like we did before. I highly doubt we'd get the wrong person- we just need to round up the people we suspect, and go from there."

"Didn't you guys keep her locked in a basement," Gelatin snapped. The reminder made Fries flinch, and Coiny, who stood beside him, shot a glare at the writing utensil.

"I remember it," He uttered.

"And look- we were RIGHT. So don't tell me we did a crappy job with it!"
As her words settled into the crowd, their breaths were held as they glanced worriedly towards one another. As much as they didn't want to believe it- something in their very cores told them that the vicious cycle was repeating once more. And this time, they couldn't risk losing any more objects.

Not again.

Hesitantly, Bottle stepped towards the group with clenched fists. "...I'm in," she said, her voice riddled with exhaustion and worry. "Whatever it takes to get everybody back."

"Count me in, too," Lollipop exclaimed, her hand instinctively reaching down to hold Taco's. "We aren't going to rest until we find out who's responsible."

"We can't let them go without finding out what happened.." Taco whispered. "...I'm in too."

And soon, agreements harmonized with the winds of the atmosphere; one by one, the recovered agreed to hold an investigation, to see who was truly behind this never-ending carousel of death.

Looking over the crowd, Pencil took in a silent breath. She had learned from her mistakes- and she'd be damned if she made the same mistakes as she did before. She'd make sure they'd pay.

No matter what.

"No matter what.." Fanny's voice caught the writing utensil's train of thought, and as she glanced towards her direction, Match quietly stepped to her side.

"I trust you," she whispered, carefully holding onto her arm. "..but who do you think could be a suspect..? We.. haven't been able to catch on at all..."

Her words fall on the rivers of doubt, but they're washed by the storms of denial as Pencil's eyes fixed onto the couple. She watched as Fanny's plug tail brushed against Bubble's cheek, which in turn,

caused the metallic soap bubble to look down, sorrowfully sinking into her embrace.

"We ask around. We look to find anything suspicious. We've done this before," Pencil claimed shamefully, taking Match's hand as her eyes narrowed towards the two. "And we'll gladly do it again."

---

bfdia 13 killed my grandma.

that entire dialogue scene with pin was written after i watched the episode. this object show shit SERIOUS

hey guys... long time no see! I'm so sorry for the long wait, I was so sure I would only need a week to regather myself from fear week. But turns out, I was burnt out and exhausted ^^' so my apologies if the writing is a little rusty, getting back into the swing of things took a lot haha

schedule wise.... well, I have no idea. uploads might take a little longer, life gets unpredictable at times and I am still recovering from the very brutal semester i had. college ain't funny i swear

but! not only that, i've got like. two new ideas for object comics. i have to catch up with ten rules, but there's also this!

AND THE MEETUP WAS SO SO FUN. IT WAS SO NICE TO MEET EVERYBODY AAA!!!

anyways, I hope you all enjoy!! I'll see you guys in the next chapter, which is one i've been planning for quite a while ;]

bye guys!

-ice

"..Thank you, Fries.."

"You'd better learn how to keep a secret, coin-creature."

He Had It Coming

SQUELCH.

I'm not sure where it went wrong.

"P-PLEASE-"

CRUNCH.

I was sure that I'd make it longer.

"N-NO! PLEASE!-"

SPLAT.

I promised I'd wait a little longer.

RRRRRRRIP.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Silence.

Heaving, I stare at the purple candy pieces in my hands. The blood, alongside the flesh fragments, were glued to the surface of my arms. Teeth and broken skull shards laid scattered amongst the floor, and I could only gaze up towards her twitching body before flinching away.

I don't remember how long it's been- the sun is still up in the sky, and I can hear the arguing from the lab from miles away- but...

'What gives.'

Her voice makes me flinch. Y-You made me-

'I DIDN'T MAKE YOU DO ANYTHING. This was simply your doing.'

SHE DIDN'T DO ANYTHING WRONG!

'You said it yourself- she was bothering you. I thought you claimed to be stronger than the words everyone throws at you, hm..?'

I....

'Perhaps I shouldn't be too angered here... need I remind you of how powerful I've become? Why- the more objects, the better! I'm finally able to get some real work done around here.'

What are you talking about?!

...

'Come on... why don't we try and remember what REALLY happened here...'

EARLIER THAT DAY....

Tossing.

Turning.

Whispers clawing their way into the slumbering mind of the hidden one.

After she had spoken to both Fries and Coiny mere days ago, Pin finally felt the crushing weight of guilt being lifted from her soul. Sure, she wasn't able to completely open up about the terrors she had to endure- but the two people she cared quite deeply for gave her the time of day.

They listened to her. And in the end, that was what mattered.

Of course, once Fries left, Pin had the time to bawl in Coiny's arms out of the terror of being forced back into the city. She knew that whatever awaited her there wasn't pretty- plus.. she had gotten used to life in the forest.

It wasn't all perfect. But it was peaceful. Quiet. Never a moment where the serenity of nature couldn't lull her into a peaceful slumber.

....

Until now.

The whispering grew frantic, beads of ooze dripping down Pin's forehead as she desperately twitched, attempting to return from her dream. It was incomprehensible, yet so..

Familiar..?

Pin....

She whined, her fingernails digging into the soil below.

Don't think I've forgotten about you..

Her heart raced, cold blood racing through her veins.

You truly thought it was over, haven't you..?

"N-No.. no.."

Well, don't you worry dear...

This is just the beginning.

"NO!" The scream escaped Pin's mouth, her body shooting up with the adrenaline racing through her petrified veins. Tears didn't hesitate to spill down her face, as her fists were poised over her head, ready to attack whatever- or whoever- was-

"PIN!"

Oh.

Shivering, her bloodshot pupil's slowly took in the familiar sight of her boyfriend, her racing breaths steadily coming to an easing pace.

Coiny- who was cradling a fresh bag of food and water- immediately let the products slip free from his hold, as he rushed to Pin's side, frantically checking on her well-being.

He cradled her face with such care, that for a moment, the voices she had previously heard vanished with the quiet winds of the season.

"I-..I only wanted to drop off some food for you," Coiny whispered, "...but I heard you crying in your sleep- are you-"

"I-it was just a stupid nightmare," Pin murmured.

For a moment, she could feel the spiking anxiety in the coin creature's bones- so she immediately sighed, giving his hands a reassuring squeeze.

"Not like last time."

"Oh- phew! I-I got scared there, haha..."

"How comforting, Coiny."

"Sorry."

A blanket of silence draped over the two. Sighing, Pin carefully picked up the food, gently storing them in the plastic bag as she handed it back to Coiny.

"I think these were yours..?"

He shook his head, a soft smile growing on his face. "They're meant for you- captain.."

"C'mon- we can share here-"

"I wish I could.." Coiny replied, glancing back towards the path that led him home. "...But I have something to get back to."

"Oh?"

"It's something GB wants us to help out with.. she didn't explain it at all- you know how she can be."

"Classic Golfball.." Pin chuckled, gently taking his hand. "I guess that means I'll be seeing you later..?"

Perhaps for the last time dear.

Pin clenched her teeth into a forced smile, as Coiny placed a kiss on the back of her hands.

"Once that's over with- you bet I'll be back."

We've got quite the plan for you...

"Please..." Pin's face grew gaunt, the plea escaping her mouth as a trembling whisper.

"What was that, Pin..?"

Shhh...

Not a word, now.

...

"...Be... Be careful when you get back, ok..? I love you."

And he loves you not.

She found letting him go much harder than it ever has been.

It took a good second or two- but as her hand slipped free from the comforting hold of her lover, she swore she felt the damning eyes of that familiar red leaf, watching.

Waiting.

Observing her every move.

Perfect.

Now that she is getting farther... it seems like we can't risk having you around.

If only...

...

Meanwhile...

T-R-E-E.

ERROR! ERROR! TREE IS STILL ALIVE.

G-R-A-S-S-Y.

ERROR! ERROR! GRASSY IS STILL ALIVE.

B-L-O-C-K-Y.

ERROR! ERROR! BLOCKY IS STILL ALIVE.

Shivering, Basketball slammed her head against the recovery center

with a saddened grunt. How could she be so ridiculous? Putting his name into the machine as many times as she'd like wouldn't change a thing.

Just when she thought things couldn't have gotten any worse, Pandora's Box was lit ablaze after she discovered what remained inside Blocky's home- well.. More like his now abandoned home. With blood, flesh, and glass spread amongst the kitchen floor like confetti, reality was set free- and before she knew it, Basketball's world was on fire.

Fire. She flinched, shakily stepping away- couldn't there have been a better comparison? What more was there to do?

Noticing that the orange sportsball was backing away, Eraser reached for her shoulder, confusion painting over his exhausted expression. "Hey- what the hell are you doing?!" he asked.

No answer.

Ok. Now his patience was running thin. Whirling her around, he slammed her against the wall, anger steadily boiling in his heart.

"ANSWER ME," he yelled. "DON'T JUST WALK AWAY!"

"I wasn't," Basketball uttered.

"Fine then. What. Were. You. Doing."

The poor scientist let the question dangle in the atmosphere; thankfully, it was just enough for Golfball to catch onto the scene, practically doing a double take at the sight of her prima being cornered.

"Can you get your disgusting claws OFF OF HER?!" she snapped, headbutting against the pink parallelogram. "I'M the only one here that's allowed to hit her!"

Eraser rolled his eyes. "Wow, how loving of you, GB."

"She's... ugh, forget it. Just leave her be and help me get everyone settled here. Her illness- or... whatever she has- is getting worse, and

she's already got enough on her mind at the moment."

"Like what? That stupid robot she can't get over?" Eraser scoffed.

"No," Basketball mumbled under her breath, "Suicide."

"BASKETBALL!"

Amongst Eraser's cackles and Golfball's lecturing, the exhausted scientist found her eyes slowly trailing back to the recovery center, the green message blinking on the pitch black screen. Taunting her. Reminding her of what she had failed to do.

Yet, there was something soothing about seeing her lost friend's name blink on the screen. Still alive. He was still out there. Somewhere. And knowing him- he was putting up one hell of a fight to stay in the realm of the living.

But on the other hand, it filled her with dread. The "STILL ALIVE" message felt like an arrow of the damned had struck her through her very core, filling her with the nightmarish scenarios of what the missing objects were enduring. She fought against the urge to picture what was taking place, yet a part of her- the tiniest, morbidly curious part of her- just wanted to know.

What good would that do?

Drawing in a breath, she quickly stepped away from the two, brushing past the growing crowd that bloomed inside of her cousin's partner's laboratory. There was a growing rumor that Golfball had something planned for everybody- after all, having some sense of guidance in this mess was better than nothing, so how could anybody refuse?

As Basketball roamed through the halls, she brushed past Bottle, not noticing the disgruntled look she was giving her. Basketball knew what she was thinking- she had nothing here to mope about. In fact- if she had wanted to do something about this- she'd have to finally accept that this was a result of HER wrongdoing.

Hell, months ago, Bottle warned her about the first disappearance that took place. And here they were- eleven others vanishing

alongside him... including those of her own blood.

...

Well. If anything was going to be done- she might as well start by giving GB's plan a chance.

When she approached the main room of the laboratory, she was surprised to see the amount of chairs that were now in place. A podium- followed by two, smaller makeshift ones- stood before them, one being held up by a tower of Golfball's own textbooks. Thankfully, there was no need to bring out the microphones- with the room being small enough to need only one's own projection.

The seats were being filled left and right, with old faces and new ones. She stepped by an anxious Leafy, who was being consoled by Firey as he offered the poor thing a cup of water, taking extra precaution as to not spill any onto himself.

"Easy," he said in a gentle tone, "It's going to be okay.."

At his words, a crooked smile wobbled onto her face. "I'll make sure it is. I-..I'm not letting anything happen."

"...Please tell me you left the knives at home."

"Well.."

From the looks of it, the majority of the slaughtered objects were shaken up by what was coming. Bomby sat beside Nickel and Naily, a crooked smile painted on his face as the judging eyes of the hotel residents stared at his very presence.

If Basketball had anymore anger left to share- she would've been one of them. But he wasn't worth a passing glance.

She then walked by an anxious Marker, who entered the room anxiously. Firey Jr. trailed behind him, yet as he tried to step in front, both Stapy and Foldy cut him off, dragging the art utensil away.

"Come on Marker," Stapy gritted through his teeth, "You don't want to

be around Liy."

Words that caught Basketball's attention, she turned, spotting the lightswitch from a few feet away. Being immediately greeted by Liy's angered scowl, the sportsball didn't hesitate to step aside as she stomped towards the group, yanking Marker back by the arm. Bell trailed after the lightswitch, carefully hovering over the two.

"Seriously?! Why be around those two jerks?!" Liy snapped, rolling her eyes at Foldy's offended scoff. "Marker- you're better off with us here."

"No he ISN'T! He wants to hang out with US!"

"NO!"

"YES!"

"NO!!!!"

"Are your friends always this batshit?" Firey Jr. squinted, watching the three tug at the taller object like a ragdoll.

If it weren't for the tug-of-war currently unfolding with his arms, Marker would have reprimanded the smaller object for his words- but he flinched, as the arguing only spiked. Firey Jr. (or Junior, for short), let this pan out for a second or two, before angrily slapping their arms away, skittering onto the top of Marker's cap.

This caught Marker by surprise. "Wh- hey! What are you-"

"ONWARDS, IDIOT. We don't have all day here." The smaller flame uttered, quickly holding on as Marker rushed away from the group, bumping into Basketball and frantically apologizing.

Well. That was certainly... a scene, Basketball thought to herself.

Having no idea where to go, the sports ball trudged towards her cousin, who was organizing a group of chairs that were separated from the crowd.

Tennis Ball didn't need to hear a word to know she was near. "Hey.. I

thought you said you were gonna rest for the day," he observed, his gaze gliding up to meet hers.

Basketball shook her head. "I wanted to help out."

"If this is about GB going off on you again, please, don't worry- I already spoke to her, and she said-"

"Tennis Ball, I don't really care about what she has to say anymore. I need to do something- and I'm not gonna sit out while you guys handle everything here."

"We really don't mind... I think we'd much rather have you getting proper rest while we-"

"Don't try to talk me out of this," Basketball snapped, nudging the chair out of his hold. "You two are scared- and if you work like that, where will it get you?"

Letting a few seconds pass, the orange sportsball let a tiny smile grow on her face as she caught onto Tennis Ball's silence. "You are a terrible liar, TB."

"I just-... we didn't want to have you overwork here. You already took over when we were-" He paused, shutting his eyes to maintain his composure, "...And now..? Grassy's missing, Robot Flower is dead, a-and Blocky- he-"

"I didn't need the reminders here, thanks." Basketball's eyes darkened, weakly pushing the chair to the side as she looked back at the crowd.

She spotted Rocky from the distance; the little guy nudging the chairs into a neat line. Basketball was sure he'd be put to do something else by Golfball- yet, she walked over, smiling through the waves of dizziness that struck.

"Helping out here?" She asked. Rocky gave her a nod.

"Did GB go against that?"

Another nod. The two giggled under their breaths, yet Basketball stumbled on her feet. Rocky's smile dropped into a frown, and he

quickly helped his 'aunt' regain her balance, quietly leading her back to Tennis Ball.

He was ready to greet the little one at the sight, but seeing his cousins state immediately cut him off. He hesitantly reached to her side- only to be interrupted by Golfball, who butted herself in between the two.

"Alright- are we here to run a trial, or were we all invited to some sort of pity party?!" she snapped, quickly pushing the chairs into an organized row. Rocky quickly skittered after her movements, much to her dismay.

"And what are you doing here young man?!"

"Helping," he squeaked.

"I wanted you to leave this trial to us! Growing rocks shouldn't be-"

"I deserve to be here too." Rocky pouted, glancing up at the scar on his head. The scientists eyes followed suit- and the disgruntled glare softened into that of pity, as she stepped back.

She couldn't. She's already been too hard on them all. The least she could do was try and show a crumb of kindness to the objects who taught her how to love.

....

No.

No- this nightmare was starting all over again. And if she succumbed to the love- then...

Huffing, Golfball turned towards the other two scientists. "I thought we were aiming to get this done ASAP!"

"Sorry GB," Tennis Ball sighed, ensuring that the chairs were in order, "I-I was just confused here- I thought we agreed that Basketball would be-"

"-Helping us get things ready?! Boy, what a fantastic idea TB! Maybe

she can make herself useful and go back to sobbing next to that pile of rubble- that way, she can let us handle things PROPERLY." At her exclamation, Golfball shoved a chair in her prima's direction- only for the taller scientist to step aside, avoiding its path.

"Dodge," she murmured. "Thanks for the chair though- I'll leave it here for... whatever section this is."

Golfball squinted at her words. "You think you're so funny, don't you."

"I guess so. My existence is a joke, after all."

For putts sake- could she be any more miserable here?! Golfball thought to herself, her eye twitching rapidly as she took in a sharp breath. She let her anger simmer down, steadying her temper as she marched past the two to lean against the main podium.

"Listen, Basketball," she began, "I know you're upset here- but I promise. We're going to find out who did this- and we're going to bring them back." She shot a quick glance at, what used to be, Robot Flower's room. "...All of them."

No response.

"I... know how much this pain is hindering your abilities to function- yet, it's important to remind yourself that it's temporary."

"...You wanna know what else is temporary, GB."

"Hm?"

"Life."

"WOULD YOU GET A HOLD OF YOURSELF, BASKETBALL?!"

That was Tennis Ball's cue to intervene. Quickly, he pulled the angered scientist away, letting Basketball take a seat in the smaller section they had organized.

There was no need to correct her on where she was supposed to sit- she was going to be one of the first to give a testimony about

everything that occurred.

As Tennis Ball guided Golfball to a different room, the Freesmarters couldn't help but notice the anger radiating from the small scientist.

Ice Cube pouted. "I can't believe we have to catch a murderer again.." she uttered under her breath.

"YOU GUYS ALREADY HAVE!!" Bracelety smiled, gently patting the objects back. "I'M SURE YOU CAN DO IT AGAIN- WE'VE GOT YOUR BACK, ALL THE WAY ICY!"

Despite the pain that quaked through Icy's body, the girl couldn't help but smile at her reassurance. She leaned into Bracelety's arms, stepping aside as the others in the group stepped ahead of them.

Squinting, Pencil led the group towards the podiums, ignoring the angered glares from the others.

"Ugh- I thought that bozo would never leave," she huffed, rushing to the back of the podium. "Now that they're out of the way, we can take matters into our own hands."

From the crowd, Firey Jr. climbed over Marker's cap, angrily pointing towards the group. "Hey! Aren't we supposed to be waiting for-"

"SHUT IT, PIPSQUEAK."

And just like that, Firey Jr.'s mouth clamped shut. His arms crossed angrily, even as Marker worriedly got him down to his seat. He was ready to console the smaller object, but he felt Pencil's eyes piercing through his soul, and all his consolement sank into the abyss of silence.

"Ok. Before I was SO rudely interrupted- I was GOING to say that we're going to be the ones taking care of this trial. Unlike bozo brain and her lame boyfriend there- we have *actual* experience with interrogations like these."

Following her words, confusion and defiance flooded the atmosphere of the lab. They knew that this was meant to be a way to pinpoint the object that was behind these disappearances- but, trusting objects like

the *Freesmarters* to handle such a serious matter?

"As if!" Coiny yelled, no longer standing for this mess. "Pencil, you locked someone in your BASEMENT the last time you did so!"

"And was the person *innocent*, Coiny?"

Gasps. Quiet ones, at least- as a faint "*oh no, she didn't...*" echoed amongst the crowd. Although Coiny kept his defiance, he felt the judging eyes burning the remaining anger he had, followed by a hand grabbing his shoulder.

He didn't need to look to know it was Fries.

Coiny sunk back into his chair, embarrassment burning at the surface of his face. Heads turned away as Fries carefully whispered to him.

"Get it together. You're sweating like a damned pig out here."

Coiny shook his head, keeping his hands slapped over his own head. "I-I don't think I can sit through this," he stuttered, "Can't I just go-"

"No." The urgency in Fries's low tone yanked the coin creature from his panicked judgement. "Everybody's already on edge here- they'll suspect somethings up if you leave this lab."

"It's not like I'm guilty!"

"-of murdering." Fries's eyes narrowed, grabbing Coiny's wrist. "You're already in deep trouble by bringing it back."

"She's not an it."

"To everybody else, she's practically DEAD."

"W-WELL-"

"AHEM." The two's heads turned as Pencil cleared her throat, snapping her fingers in the vicinity of their faces. "Sorry to interrupt your little therapy session here- but unless you two have an accusation up those grease sticks of yours, I suggest you keep your mouths shut. Got it?"

Ignoring the disgruntled glare Fries gave her, the two boys nodded, leaving Pencil to shake her head at their sudden interruption. She could care less about what they were yapping about, but she wasn't going to let it get in the way of something as dire as this.

She took a few steps behind the podium, grabbing GB's notepad from its desk and tossing it behind her. "No need for this!" she hummed.

"Uh.. Pencil? We could've used that for-"

"Nothing. Like I said, Ruby- no use in something so time consuming like that!"

"Oh.. f-fine by me..." Ruby uttered, cowering away from her friend.

"You seem a little too confident in this," Donut spoke from the crowd, crossing his arms with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh please," Match scoffed, shakily brushing the faint burns on the side of her arms, "If it weren't for coin-creature over there- we would've, like, resolved this a long time ago."

A long time ago.

What could have been if they had stopped her a long time ago.

Bubble never found herself reminiscing on the days of the past. What seemed like a hopeful beginning for a brand new chapter in their lives, twisted itself into a never-ending nightmare that kept everybody in the palm of its blood-soaked claws.

She shivered. There was never a waking moment where the others steered clear from her mind.

Especially-

"PENCIL!!!"

Great.

Flinching at Golfball's enraged scream, Bubble clutches Fanny's tail tightly as she cowered behind her girlfriend. Seems like she wasn't

the only one; in the corner of her eye, she noticed Ice Cube flinching, gritting her teeth at the grading voice of the scientist. Bracelety didn't hesitate to comfort her girlfriend, noticing the irked stare that Fanny was giving Golfball. She shook her head, and mimicked the look, their eyes following the scientist as she stomped towards the podium.

"Nerd alert," Match mumbled, sighing as she shoved Golfball to the side. "Watch where you're going, bossy-bot."

"How's about you watch where you're STANDING, you walking fireplace."

That wiped the peeved look off of Match's face. Aggravated, Pencil gently pulled her partner to her side, making sure they cut the scientist's path to the main podium.

"I hope you ladies know that this isn't a game we're playing here," Golfball hissed through gritted teeth, "I already told you that WE we're going to be handling this-"

"GB, WE caught Pin MONTHS before we were killed. I think we'd be better off taking this into our own hands, here," Flower interjected, angrily placing her hands onto her hips. "This isn't an issue that's going to be solved with your little calculations!"

"Well, EXCUSE ME. I think TB and I are perfectly capable of handling an investigation revolving around missing-"

"Oh for THREADS SAKE- WILL YOU TWO SHUT UP?!" Needle's yell sliced through the atmosphere like a switchblade, immediately shutting down the tensions between the women up front. She had stood up from her seat, carefully walking around Teardrop and Eggy before clapping her hands together.

"If you two aren't going to figure this stupid trial out- then I will."

"Oh yeah?!" Golfball's eyes narrowed through her glasses as she asked Needle, "How are you gonna do THAT?!"

~

"Alright- let's run through this once more. How is this Trial gonna pan out?"

"Simple," Golfball muttered to TB, holding an ice pack on the side of her face. "We'll begin by letting the others speak- let them give us any tips or suspicious sightings that they've noticed in the past few months. With this, we'll be able to get a sort of roll call on the accused, and we'll then follow up with the testimonies from-"

"THE JURY?" Bracelety asked, causing Golfball to jump.

"Ugh- NO, you little-"

"No- I think it's actually the eye-watcher... things..?" Ruby stated with a shrug.

"NO NO- THOSE ARE EYEWITNESSES!"

"That's dumb. I like Eye watchers more! It makes this cooler!"

Before the two could get another word out, Tennis Ball anxiously intervened. "W-Well- we aren't trying to make this... entertaining.."

"It'd make it worth our time here, at least," Naily scoffed, kicking at the ground as she swung her legs from the seat. "I had things to do today!"

"I'm sure all of us do, Naily. But we've got a lot of missing objects here! Might as well TRY and do something about it unless you want to be on that list too." Eggy uttered the last sentence under her breath.

Golfball's eye twitched. The more the others spoke out, the closer she was getting to throwing the chairs she had organized oh so neatly. Yet, before she could draw closer to snapping, she felt Tennis Ball's reassuring hold- enough to keep her anger at bay.

"I know these circumstances aren't... ideal... for a majority of you," she began, "...but I need you all to understand that we don't have

much time here. Whoever this person is- they're moving quick. And I don't think any of us would appreciate it if more objects started slipping away here, hm?"

The silence was deafening. Yet the weight of what was taking place quickly fell into the air like grains of sand, and everybody was quieting down, not wanting to interrupt them anymore.

"Thank you." Sighing, Golfball exchanged a glance with Pencil, who nodded as their eyes met. She too, held an ice pack on a freshly gained bruise that stung at the side of her face- but she shook off the pain, pointing towards the chairs on the left.

"I know Bubble already spoke to those who had someone vanish here- so when it's time, we'll have you all sit over there and give your testimonies once it's your turn to speak."

"And please," Flower chimed in, "...For anybody who has any idea as to who this person could be- have your defenses hot and ready to go. We aren't in the mood for any more fights to break out here in the lab."

"We also aren't in the mood to deal with anything BROKEN in the lab." Golfball sighed. "Or anyone to-"

"Uh- ok. We get it."

A hush fell over the two.

"...Well. Let's begin- shall we?"

~

"So, you're telling me that Blocky was nowhere to be found on the scene?"

Pen's hands wrung together at Tennis Ball's question. As much as he didn't want to recall the previous hours, the images of Blocky's

bloodied kitchen sparked in his aching mind.

The blood. Oh.

All the blood.

It made Pen's stomach twist into knots.

His arms quivered, and it immediately caught Eraser's attention.

"Yes," The pink parallelogram murmured. "And we'd appreciate it if we didn't get any reminders here."

"That's fine- we're sorry about-"

"I don't think we're here to pander to your emotions," Golfball snapped, pacing around the podium as she raised an eyebrow at the two. "Tell us- what did you see at the scene of the crime?"

Pen flinched. Shivering, he'd cling onto Eraser's hand as he tried to ease his voice into speaking. "W-..We we're only with Basketball.. But when we walked inside, we-"

"Basketball?! Ugh- I knew she was too sad for her own good. But.. murder?!" Golfball whispered, giving a dirty look towards the orange sports ball. It took the scientist a moment to process her words, but she was cut off by Eraser, who slammed his hand on the counter of the podium.

"WE AREN'T SAYING IT WAS HER, GENIUS!" he yelled. "If you want someone to blame- then look at Bottle!"

"Why her?!"

"Oh jeez, I dunno! Is it normal for someone to walk around with a list?!"

The mere word set off alarm bells in the minds of the others, as all heads immediately swiveled to stare at the glass bottle that sat in silence. Next to her, Pie worriedly took a hold of her arm, and Woody was the first to shake his head at the accusation.

"Huh. Already denying the claims, huh?" GB tutted, approaching the three. "Any reason as to why you all look so tense?"

"Do you hear yourself, GB? You're jumping to conclusions, here," Pie reprimanded.

"I AM NOT! The fact that she has a list is already suspicious ENOUGH!"

"She also has a shovel!" Junior shouted from the top of Marker's head. "I've seen it before- every day, she'd leave the hotel and stay gone for HOOOUUURS."

"Firey Jr.- that CAN'T be the case! I thought we already talked about it- the murderer could be some sort of..." Marker shuddered, "...vampire!"

"Eh. Not as realistic as the crazy girl with the list in her hands."

Pie frowned at the little flame. "That's *real* nice of you, Firey Jr."

"Thank you! I'm here to help, after all."

Even as the accusation was being thrown left and right, Pie couldn't help but notice the way Bottle's eyes twitched, narrowing at every object surrounding her. She did her best to ease the tension she had, but blinked in confusion as Golfball leaned closer towards her, her eyes narrowing at Bottle.

"HELLOOO?" she shouted. "Care to give a DEFENSE, here?"

Bottle shrugged halfheartedly. "There's no need for me to do so."

"SEE?! SUSPICIOUS!!"

"THANK YOU FOR YOUR INPUT, FIREY JR- BUT ZIP IT." Golfball snapped- goodness, how many times was she going to SNAP at these fools?!

There was no way she was gonna let these guys back out there. It'd be nothing more than a death sentence- and, as much as she hated to admit it...

She was scared. In fact- it was fear that led her to where she stood now. And she'd be damned if she'd let it take control over her life once more.

Seeing that the scientist was recollecting her thoughts, Pencil walked over, her arms folding over her chest. "Well, Bottle? Got anything to say?"

Silence.

The clock ticked, and Bottle stood up with ease, making her way to the podium. She didn't hesitate to unfold the little piece of paper she carried with her- holding it out for the crowd to see.

"I hope at least *somebody* in this room remembers," said Bottle, glaring at the orange sports ball that sat nearby, "but ever since Tree first disappeared- I've been looking for him everywhere. Day and night- I kept a list of the places I've searched on hand."

She watched everybody take a better look at the scribbled notes on the paper. Many were quick to ease off the poor woman, yet Eraser didn't seem too convinced at the proof.

"Yeah right. That could also be a list of the places you'd bury a BODY. Now TELL US- WHAT DID YOU DO TO OUR FRIEND?!"

"Nothing!" The serenity in Bottle's voice wavered with stress. "I-I only got to know Blocky in the TLC- we were never close! Why would I try and hurt someone- let alone someone I was trapped in the TLC with! That includes all of you, too!"

"She's not in the wrong, there," Barf Bag spoke, "...even if your point was true, Eraser- wouldn't someone try and shatter her before she even attacked?"

Hums of agreement waved throughout the crowd. Following her statement, Eraser's eyes blazed with frustration- for he was convinced that she wasn't telling the truth.

He knew too well how much of a nuisance she was in the TLC! She practically got in the way of every soul around her- how could anyone believe that SHE was innocent here?!

Slamming his fist down, he spoke. "That does make sense- I'll give you that," he began. "But how do you explain the shovel?!"

"A part of me wanted to have it on hand in case he was trapped somewhere..? But with everything happening, I dunno.. I.." Bottle's eyes lowered, a small, red hue flashing before it dissipated, "I guess I held onto it as a way to defend myself.

~

"SEE?! THOSE are my reasons as to why Teardrop's behind all of this!"

Perhaps, in another timeline, these idiots could see the brilliance behind Golfball's accusation. Unfortunately, here she was! Being met with puzzled expressions that spoke a thousand words.

As for Teardrop, she had an all-familiar glare that cracked through Golfball's glasses, her foot tapping on the ground in disbelief. It took her a moment to snap the confidence out of her, as she turned towards Eggy, signing her defense with sharp movements.

"...She's telling me that she was at Needle's yesterday. Nowhere near Blocky's house, and-"

Suddenly, Eggy's words fell silent. She blinked, processing what Teardrop had told her, her words soon following her bewildered look.

"..Are you sure you want me to... say that?"

With a nod, Eggy hesitantly looked back up, clearing her throat. "...She told me that even though it wasn't her... he, uh... had it coming."

"I'm sorry- Blocky had it COMING?!"

"You heard that correctly."

Whispers and rumors flowed amongst the objects in the crowd, dubious glances sliding towards the water droplet. Even with this, she showed no regret or remorse- simply continuing to sign her message.

"She says: countless objects here have had to put up with that idiot's nonsense for ages. Not just that- LOTS of us were either hurt or killed by that prank show of his. Please- somebody tell me- how many of us were affected by one of Blocky's 'harmless' pranks?"

Hands. Lots of hands bloomed into the atmosphere, fingers swaying like the freshly risen petals of a new flower in the spring. Teardrop gave it a second, and a smile eased on her face as she watched Golfball lift her leg (this counts as a hand raise give me a break).

"W-Well," Junior cleared his throat, quickly lowering his hand from the air. "That's still real suspicious of you to say, Teardrop. Just because he played out his pranks, doesn't mean he deserved to vanish into thin air!"

"Or die," Basketball murmured quietly.

"Well, Teardrop?! What do YOU have to say about the night of Blocky's disappearance?" Golf Ball squinted, watching Teardrop's hand flick with every sign she gave.

Eggy blinked, looking back towards the scientist with a presumptuous smirk, much to the scientist's dismay.

"I'M WAITING!"

"There's no other way I can put this, Golfball- but she's telling you to fuck off."

~

Before Pencil could speak, Junior leaped onto Marker's head, pompously pointing a finger towards the stand. "Come on Liy. You

SHOVED HER DOWN THE STAIRS- you're OBVIOUSLY the murderer!"

"As annoying as that little flame has gotten... He does have a point," Lollipop tutted softly. "I remember overhearing that stupid catfight down the hall."

"What- did you hear that BEFORE or AFTER your face melted off."

Liy's remark made the candystick sigh. "Defensive, aren't you? That isn't a good look for you, Lightswitch-y."

"I'm not being defensive here! I- ugh, that was a completely separate incident. As of now, we're talking about Blocky- and everyone else who vanished from the city. And to that, I keep my innocence."

"Really?!" Foldy yelled. "Just cut the act, Liy- unless you'd like everyone here to learn about your little sobfest of an origin story."

"More like the history of a ongoing serial killer." Stapy chimed in with a snicker.

Angered, Liy spoke through gritted teeth, clawing at the edge of the podium. "That is NOBODIES business but mine. I trusted you with that- and if you were anything of a decent object, you'd keep my business out of your MOUTH."

"But Liy- this is about a murder! That'd be vital to a case like this, wouldn't it?" Foldy hummed, tossing a glance towards Golfball, who nodded in response. With this confirmation, she'd smirk, as Junior hopped on the top of a chair, squinting.

"YEAH! What do you have to say to THAT, HUH?!" He yelled.

"..I only wanted to try and get to safety. Not even for myself.. I wanted to get her out because I knew she was in danger. But I couldn't. I lost her that night. And when Foldy said what she had said to me that night.." She paused, tears flooding her vision. "..I.. I dunno. Maybe it was grief.. or anger. I never want to hurt anyone again. That goes for Blocky; I may not have gotten to know him... but I'd never hurt someone like that."

She collected herself, keeping her voice from warbling. "But you know what.." Carefully taking a deep breath, Liy's pupils trailed towards Foldy. "... She deserved it."

"Hah! You're really setting yourself up here, Liy," Bell sneered. "For all we know, you could be lying about this! You were the last one seen in Saw's garden- and from the looks of it, you were about to KILL someone."

"Wouldn't be surprised. After all, she already killed me," Foldy uttered under her breath. "She must've gotten all the others, too-"

With an angered glare, Pencil slammed her hands against the counter. "AND WHO'S RUNNING THIS ENTIRE THING?!"

Silence. Stunned, the three cowered back at Pencil's exclamation, her hands stinging from the impact on the table. "...Ugh. Please- let's just handle this in an orderly fashion."

Says you, Bubble thought to herself as her eyes followed the writing utensil. She watched as Pencil made her way towards Liy, keeping her stern posture to avoid any more tension between the group.

"Alright, let me ask this a little more nicely here," she began. "Why were you at Saw's garden so late, with the tools that belonged to them?"

There was a moment of silence, and Pencil swore that the lightswitch was swimming through words that wandered aimlessly in her mind. It took a few tries, and as the tears slowly welled up in those eyes of hers, she spoke.

"It was Remote's birthday," she whispered. "Not-.. really her birthday, but I remember her telling me it was the day she gained her own consciousness. Now that everyone's afraid of using the garden again, I.. I didn't want to leave the flowers I had for her there. I didn't want them to die- so I had to go back and get them from the ground so I could plant them in my backyard."

"But why the flowers?! Couldn't you start over with them?!"

When Foldy's words broke past her mouth, Liy buried her face in her

own hands, unable to keep her voice from the grief that cracked through it.

"Those were her flowers. Hers... I.. I didn't want to fail at something like that again- I already lost something of her... I didn't want to lose this.."

"..Liy.."

"I miss her so much.."

~

'Are you getting any familiarity here, darling?~'

...

'Hey. I'm talking to you, Bubble.'

...How much of this did I forget...

She sighed. '...I guess we'll have to continue down memory lane, sproutling~'

~

The voices.

I didn't remember hearing them at first.

But the fighting. There was a lot of it.

One by one, the sound of overlapping arguments flooded the back of Bubble's mind- and there she was, standing beside her friends, and

staring out at the havoc that unraveled before them.

Well- havoc was too much to describe it. In reality, Junior was the first who caught her gaze, as he was now stomping around and pointing fingers at every object he could see.

"Ok ok- I've got it this time. Blocky's murderer is... uh- NAILY!" he shouted, much to Naily's dismay.

"I may have my instincts here- but I don't have arms, genius!" She scoffed. "Why don't you try and accuse someone your OWN size?!"

"WE'RE LITERALLY THE SAME SIZE, SMARTASS!"

Incomprehensible, anger-fueled gibberish sparked from Junior's tongue. It was almost comedic- at least, until he flailed his arms in the air, stomping around the courtroom with his pupils lurking for the next "criminal" he caught sight of.

As much as this was drifting away from the issue at the table, Marker was hesitant on interfering with his effort to find the suspect. He felt the others giving him looks, trying to push him to get the kid back to his seat.

He especially felt this from Pencil and Pen. Whilst the alliance leader was struggling to contain her own exasperation, the other- who had looked as if he had seen a ghost- was now staring at his cousin, his eyes haunted by a damning sight that Marker couldn't possibly comprehend.

He knew what they were trying to get to him. Get Junior to quiet down, or else they'll deal with it themselves.

This was a family matter- and Junior throwing damaging accusations was striving them farther and farther away from ending this neverending nightmare.

Family.

With sweaty hands, and a slight unease that dug into the center of his spine, Marker began to approach the little flame, just as the latter threw a pointed finger towards-

"AHA! How could I have missed it- the suspect is OBVIOUSLY Bell!"

"Bell?" Tennis Ball yawned, holding a remark back. Junior nodded feverishly, hopping onto an empty seat and guiding the eyes of the others up the object's string.

"YEAH! She's a SNEAK! I mean- Does anyone know where her string goes? She could be hiding everyone up there! Like Tree- or Snowball!!"

"...Get him out."

And just like that, the fire in Junior's soul flickered out. Confused, he looked back towards the others, not noticing Marker approaching with his cap in his arms. One swing- and the object caught the little flame inside of it, nervously holding him up in the air.

"I... think we should get some fresh air, Junior!" He laughed nervously, careful as to not burn himself. "We gotta let them handle this!"

"What the- MARKER! PUT ME DOWN!"

"We'll sit this one out, and then we can come back later!"

"NO WAY!" exclaimed Junior. Frustrated, he peeked over the edge of the purple cap, angrily scanning through the souls around him. "I know who the murderer is, AND I'M GONNA FIND OUT!"

"I'm sure you will!"

"Wait- you're taking me away here- MARKER, YOU'RE THE MURDERER! That explains why you were off doing- SOMETHING, last weekend!"

"Oh Junior- you're too funny!" The taller object laughed, swinging the doors open as they made their way up the steps. "I was just eating the dirt like any other Sunday!"

"SUUURE YOU WERE!"

With that, a small draft waved from the closing doors, leaving the

citizens in a hesitant silence once more. There may have been some sort of ease with the ridiculousness that Firey Jr. had carried out mere moments ago, yet their comedic moment was slammed back into a reality in which they so desperately wished to escape. Faint smiles dropped into frigid lines, eyes returning to study the attitudes of the people they had come to know over a period of time.

Trust rotted like the final flower at the cusp of winter. And now, everyone was plummeting into the bitter cold of what awaited them.

Staring at the doors that swung like the bait at the end of a fish hook, Bubble clawed at the idea of an escape. To run off, following the distractions that kept the world off of her shoulders. It became a craving that felt like needles stabbing into the deepest layers of her flesh. Similarly, she cursed herself for the thought of running away from the consequences of her own actions, because that was something *she* had done, so long ago.

Pin's moments of despair and endless rivers of crocodile tears may have been a way for her to avoid the blame- but Bubble couldn't play by those rules.

Not if she just wanted to get through this. If she did this- her loved ones stayed clear from her own hands.

Holding back, Bubble watched as Pencil clamped her hands together, giving a slight nod towards the scientists. It was a casual drift back into the flow of the trial, but as she looked away, she was met with the familiar, blue hue of Ice Cube's eyes.

She jumped. "Oh- Oicey... Oi didn't see you there.."

"Sorry," the smaller cube sighed, kicking at the ground, "The trial's been getting to me."

'Getting to her? Oh please. There's still so much these idiots have yet to uncover...~'

Bubble clenched her seat, keeping herself grounded to the sound of the conversation. "Y-You too, huh?"

"It's stupid... and to think- I finally started feeling like our lives- no,

my life- was getting back to some sense of normal, something I haven't really remembered for ages- just for the corpses to fall back into my dreams."

'Aw! How tragic... she thinks we're here to care for her pointless little banter.'

"O-Oi know how you feel.." Bubble whispered. "The nightmares foinally stopped bothering me too... Oi felt safe enough to look back and realize that it.."

'Would all come back to you?~'

"..Wouldn't happen again.."

Ice Cube frowned at her words. She stood up, carefully approaching the metallic soap bubble and giving her a reassuring 'hug'. The immediate touch made Bubble flinch, yet...

When was the last time the two had a proper chance to talk like this? The two were burdened with the history of the previous massacre, and following their recovery, both had no choice but to haul the memories alongside them wherever they went.

It felt like their last moment together was back at the garden, staring up into-

'The sky...? Right after you interfered with my previous garden..? Don't worry, Bubble- I've gone through plenty of vessels before you and Pin.'

'Yet your little act of heroism will be something you and I will NEVER let go of.'

Silently, Bubble prayed that Icy didn't feel the fear that was now prying at her own skin, keeping her so tense that it felt like she'd shatter at any moment. She returned the hug, holding Ice Cube carefully.

"Oi still can't believe this is happening.." she whispered, tears beginning to sting at her eyes. "Oi know everyone is making promises to keep us safe.. But what if they can't..?"

"Bubble..-"

"You and I both remember how Pin was loike- how close she got to killing US before oi killed her- w-what if, whoever's doing this is stronger than she was..?"

The hug grew tighter. "I-I don't think-"

"They oilready took eight objects away, without oinyone noticing!"

"B-Bubble-"

"Whoit if they're after us?! Oifter me?! Oi killed Pin, oi-" She drew in a trembling breath. "...Whoit oif that makes me... just as bad as her...?"

"There's no need to worry about that, B*ubble. You're already a monster in our eyes*."

Bubble froze.

"Whoit did you say..?" The words fell from her tongue in the form of a frightened whisper. She stared at Ice Cube, who's face was staring away from her own, simply leaning into the hug in the deafening silence.

Was that even her..? It sounded like Ice Cube- hell, it may have been a mere whisper, but the soft tone of the object's voice was something Bubble couldn't find herself forgetting.Hesitant, she cleared her throat once more, hoping she sounded as normal as possible. "Oicey...?"

"We know it was you... Bubble."

Bubble screamed before she realized it was of her own. She fell back, feeling her body slam against the ground before frantically skittering away from the seat. The adrenaline seared through her veins, her legs kicking at the air in terror.

It wasn't until a few seconds had passed when she realized that there was nobody standing in front of the chair. No- it was impossible.

It couldn't have been-

She was RIGHT THERE!

Was she..?

One frightening breath after another, Bubble blinked away the tears that now flooded her vision. The familiar sight of her friends all stood around her- from Match, to Ruby, to...

Book..?

Her racing heart spilled into Bubble's shoes. A hurricane of panicked thoughts raged in her mind, but the terror drowned her into silence, as a pathetic wisp of air broke past her throat.

There she stood. Amongst the panicked Freesmarters who tried to get

her up, Book stayed frozen, blood trickling down her open wound and splashing against the floor.

I know.

Her damning glare crushed Bubble with the weight of her sins. Was it the burning tears that painted her dead friend into her sight? The cursed truth that emerged from Ice Cube?

"N-No- No, this isn't real-" The object whispered, slapping her hands over her head as her body curled up as tightly as it could. "None of this is real- you're not-"

Sounds familiar.

Don't think I didn't know, Bubble.

Being stuck there... I got to learn a lot about what you've done.

It was there that the room slowly fell into a haunting darkness. Freesmart dissipated from her own view- and a few more figures emerged behind Book, staggering to her side as their glowing eyes all found their way to hers. With every movement, bones cracked free from their fleshy prisons, protruding from bleeding wounds as every one of them struggled to keep balance.

Guts trailed behind their agonizing footsteps. Chunks of Tree's brain splat beneath his feet, with his skull caving in with a wet crunch. Dirt and maggots wriggled out of Gaty's open mouth, with bloody tears

staining her ghostly-pale cheeks.

Wounds upon wounds, every breath brought them nothing but eternal torment.

Not like it would stop them, though.

As a piece of Grassy's ribs crunched with a slight stumble, a horrified wail managed to free itself from Bubble's throat. She pressed her back against the wall, her shaking hands covering her mouth in a desperate attempt to-

You can't run away from us, Bubble.

Bubble flinched at Book's bitter tone. "Y-You're dead- o-oi'll of you are dead, oi-"

And whose fault is that.

Book's voice felt like sandpaper scraping against her raw, beating heart.

"OI THOUGHT YOU'D UNDERSTAND!"

I thought you were a friend.

I tried to help you all. I was so close to fixing that recovery center- I did it for everyone... for you. Because I knew the fear that lived, deep down in your heart.

I never hurt you. I never wanted to.

I only wanted to do my best.

I wanted.. to be worth something.

Chills trickled down Bubble's soul like raindrops on a window, as the

bitter cold of the objects began to brush against her.

Do you think any of us 'understand'? After everything you've done...

You could have made it quick. A stab to the chest would've done better- an arrow to the skull... But look at what you've done.

We cannot sleep.

We cannot cry.

"Oi just need-"

NO.

A haunting mixture of lost voices pierced through Bubble's ears. She flinched, her terror spiking as she noticed the ghosts approaching her, one by one.

Do you think we want to hear your excuses?! You were my FRIEND.

Book.

I only wanted to help your friends. Was it because I couldn't help you..?

Tree.

Was it because we tried to help..?

Saw and Gaty, thorny vines entangling them as one.

Or was it because I had it coming.

A faint trace of Blocky's voice- drowning and choking in the endless pool of blood that dripped down his throat. All it took was one glance at what remained of his face, and all the color in Bubble's face drained.

No matter what excuse you have... it won't save our souls. Nothing can save us now.

Balloony.

One by one, the gardened inched closer to the source of their suffering, ignoring the cries of guilt that surrounded them. Each of them had gotten far used to the sounds of their own suffering...

What made this any different?

It was only until a tiny figure stumbled up to Bubble, his head slowly lifting to meet her gaze. She made an effort to keep her eyes closed, but when the tiny hand brushed against her own, they peeled open to meet the one, petrified eye that stared right through her soul.

Unlike the others, there was no malice in Grassy's aura. Instead, he shakily tugged at her hand, forcing himself to speak through the blood that clogged his throat.

Grassy just wants to go home.

Yet, we don't know what home is anymore. Book stepped forwards. *Our minds, twisted beyond recognition... and you sit in this room with a cracking halo over your head.*

When will this end for us..?

They spoke as one.

Forced to bleed for eternity- with no chance of freedom in sight.

Inching closer, and closer.

Wasn't freedom what you wanted... Bubble...?

BUBBLE?!

"BUBBLE?!"

Bubble jolted at the sound of her name, her limbs flailing for a split second before the familiar chord tail soothed them to her side. She shot up, breathing heavily, her 'nostrils' taking in the cold air, her ears tuning back in and welcoming the terrified voices of the crowd.

Rather than being greeted with the dead, Bubble's eyes focused and took in the sight of GB, TB, Fanny, Bracelety, and Freesmart standing around her.

"Can we give her space to breathe, please?!" GB snapped, forcing the girls to back away as TB helped the object back to her feet.

But even with this help, Bubble forced the larger sports ball off of her, desperately turning left and right, only to find that she was standing behind the chair she had been seated at- which was neatly in its place.

Confused, her words spill out in an alphabet soup. "Wh- h-how- oi thought- Oicey-"

"Breathe," Tennis Ball uttered, checking on a fresh bruise that she had on the back of her head, "You hit your head pretty hard.."

"We had no idea how," Ruby avowed, taking a hold of Bubble's hand, "W-We were in the middle of Firey Jr.'s ranting- and all of a sudden, you started mumbling..?"

Bubble's pupils tightened. "Mumbling..? Oi was talking to Oicy..?"

With the conversation being directed towards the smaller object, Ice Cube looked up, confusion dawning over her face.

"Bubble... I-I was with Bracelety...? We were on the other side with Match..?"

"Oi saw you- y-you were sitting roight next to me!" Bubble stuttered, shaking as she looked towards Fanny. "Didn't you see?!"

A hush. Eyes shifted towards one another, and Fanny nervously took Bubble's hand, caressing it as gently as she could. Bubble never gave herself up to self-pity- after all, she's so used to her entire life disappearing in an instant, that it didn't really affect her anymore-

but now, the pity threatened to drag her down into its deepest abyss, and not even the comforting touch of her girlfriend could stop it.

Fanny began speaking. "Bubble, are you-"

"Oi'm fine."

"No- ugh, I hate it when you lie! You just fainted in the middle of the lab- w-was it because of-"

"Oi just haven't been sleeping well."

"Bubble..."

Meanwhile, the objects in the lab stared with a mixture of emotions- confusion, boredom, unease- all aimed towards the scene that bloomed before them.

Careful to avoid Gelatin (who was snoring in his seat), Lollipop took a gentle hold of Taco's arm, leaning in for a whisper.

"Doesn't that seem off to you?"

Taco blinked. "I mean- everything feels off when you see someone faint in the middle of something."

"I don't mean that, Taco- just take a look here. Don't you think it's a bit... strange...? Bubble hasn't said a word for the entirety of the trial."

"It could be because she's traumatized here."

"And if she's not..? Seeing things? Eyeing Firey Jr. as he pointed fingers at everybody?" Lollipop uttered, her eyes narrowing as she watched the group get Bubble situated. "I don't know about you- but something seems fishy about her.."

"You sure it isn't the fish I have here?" Taco smiled, giggling at the glare from the taller object. Lollipop didn't hesitant to give her a nudge, yet before she could say a word, a familiar pillow popped in between the two.

"What's this about being fishy?"

"ACK- Pillow! At least give us a heads up here!"

"No thanks! It's more fun this way." Pillow giggled, ignoring Taco's words as she gave her fish a playful 'boop' on its forehead. "I don't assume that this is the kinda fishy you're talking about, hm?"

Lollipop pouted, gently pushing the other object aside. "Even if it was, why would *you* care, feather-brain?"

"Because I'm just as suspicious as you!"

"I-... what."

"Come on- I've overheard what's gone down a while back. Hanging around the scientists always comes with a plus.." Pillow hummed. "And turns out- Bubble's really going hand in hand with how Pin was acting!"

Both Taco and Lollipop watched, as Pillow tapped her chin in thought, pacing around the seat where Gelatin sat fast asleep. "It makes you wonder- not a single person who was revived from the last massacre got accused. Us TLC-ers got the rough end of things- but don't you think it'd be easier to do this sorta thing after already living through it?"

"I dunno... Can it?"

The woman turned, surprised to see that Match was approaching their seats. Her eyebrow was tilted upwards, unsure of what to make of the topic at hand.

It was her friend- one of her closest friends- that they were talking about here! Someone who managed to end Pin's massacre before she could do more harm!

But even with that- her brain quietly nagged at her soul, begging her to take a closer look at the claims.

....

Was it possible to separate the brain and the heart to see what was at stake..?

"Can we help you?" Pillow asked, blinking innocently as she gave the matchstick a friendly wave. Her eyebrows furled together at the sentence.

"I was gonna tell you three to stop the talking here, since GB was gonna make an announcement.. but.."

"But?" Lollipop asked.

"...We need to talk to you three."

"Talk, indeed." Golfball interrupted, stepping onto Tennis Ball as he approached the center of the podium. "If any of you have any tips you'd like to discuss- please meet with me OR Pencil up here on our stage. As for the rest of you- take this as a recess. We meet back here in thirty minutes."

---

edit: I scheduled this at 5 am instead of pm so please forgive me for that, I've been sick as hell for the past few days now

wtf was that elimination yesterday.

anyways hi, its been a while. sorry about that! don't really know where to start in terms of what happened to me- the whole stalker situation was rough but with certain. political events happening. Me and my family have had to lay low due to us being a family of immigrants! so the past few months have been, to put it in simple

terms: laying low.

I can't say confidently if the guy is gone for good- previously he'd stay silent for months and then i'd get a notif from him on some random tuesday or whatever, but I kinda miss being able to post and stuff.

but yeah! uh, i hope you guys liked this? its really been a while, with everything going on it took me a lot to get to writing again (thank you to those who helped me w motivation!! yall r real ones).

AND ONE SMALL UPDATE: rather than releasing the next two chapters daily, I'll be releasing those weekly to let everything settle in! next week's chapter is simply "Recess"- same day, same time.

I... think thats about it? So sorry for the wait. Lots of things going on in my personal life and I come back to y'all with something leading up to quite the change.

see you guys next week :)

-ice

Recess

'Alright... where did we leave off, darling?~'

Recess was called.

'Aha! That's right... don't forget Lollipop's eyeball there! Such a pretty shade of purple..'

Can we just get back into remembering, here.

'Okay, okay....'

HOURS BEFORE...

"I HATE walking!! How far is this place supposed to be..?!"

"THEY SAID IT WAS UP THIS HILL- GOSH, IT'S SO DARK, I CAN BARELY SEE!!"

"That's because of the storm that's headed this way Bracelety! Let's just hurry up and see what they were losing their minds over!"

"I-I DUNNO FANNY... THEY TOLD US WE SHOULD'VE-"

"Bracelety. Bracelety. At this point- you should know that I hate being told what to do."

"BUT THEY SAID-"

"No no no. I'm gonna stop you right there and tell you- I don't CARE about what they have to say. The reason you and I are doing this is to find Bubble and Ice Cube. That's it."

...

"DO YOU THINK THEY'D FIND A PLACE TO HIDE IN HERE..?"

"As much as I hate the forest... I wouldn't blame them if they did. The darkness hides anything out here... a little too well."

"IT'S ALMOST LIKE A GAME OF HIDE AND SEEK!"

"...I don't think so, Bracelety. I-.."

"HIII BELL!! HI CLOUDY!!"

"OW! I HATE IT when you yell out of the blue, Bracelety- ugh, my ear!"

"SORRY!! I SAW THEM FLYING AWAY!!"

"I could give less of a- wait, what do you mean by 'flying away'..?"

"THEY WERE GOING BACK TO THE CITY!!"

"What..?"

"SEEMS LIKE THEY WERE IN A RUSH, TOO!! HECK- THEY LOOKED WORRIED!"

"Do you hear yourself right now?!"

....

"BRACELETY."

"WHAT??"

"Come on- we need to keep following this trail! They must've FOUND SOMETHING!"

Running.

Running.

An eternity, spent yearning. Hoping. Wishing to see the one she had rooted for, after all this time.

No walls separated them any longer.

She was here now.

It was like she promised.

She was-

"Bracelety...?"

Her name slithers to her in the form of a petrified whisper.

She wanted to look at Fanny. Her body ached to turn and get the familiar, reassuring gaze from her newly found friend.

But her eyes stayed. Locked. Cemented, on the-

"Is that..."

A hand.

Hands.

Hands, left and right- blossoming before them, their fingers swaying ever so lifelessly, caught in the currents of the haunting forest.

"Fanny..?"

Peeling her gaze away, Bracelety struggled to cling onto Fanny's gaze- or anything surrounding her. The scent of blood and decay overpowered her 'nostrils', and a sharp gasp from the electrical fan tugged at her attention.

"What is this..?" she whispered.

A hush.

There was blood. Flesh, protruding from the bushes of mesmerizing flowers and fresh mountains of dirt.

Could this even be named a garden? A macabre reality, painting itself amongst the two, with the lifeless corpses of familiar faces scattered amongst the remains. Although their expressions silently wailed the agony they endured mere months ago, their mutilated bodies trailed around the center, guiding both Fanny and Bracelety's gaze to its center.

Once her gaze brushed amongst the blue, bloodied body, Bracelety froze. The others were beginning to gather, their footsteps frantically echoing amongst the trees. Words were said- but all that filled the bracelet's mind was the numbing terror at, what should've been, her first reunion with her beloved.

She knew where Fanny's eyes were. No point in turning for the, now nonexistent, reassurance. Bracelety stared at the carved ice cube, the pile of ice carvings mixed within a damning coat of months old blood.

Her eyes were open, but they saw nothing before them. They were dull, pale, and her mouth, upturned into a slight smile. Blood stained her lips, and it took her a moment to notice the shattered teeth fragments that laid on her lap.

Next to her laid Bubble, her arm outstretched to hold her friend as close as she could. The soap bubble's crystalline body was left untouched, yet the gashes on her arm revealed bloody smiles, the white of the bone stabbing through their line of sight.

Their search had finally come to an end. Yet, the bracelet and electrical fan slowly turned towards one another, their words trapped in the deepest pit of their terrified souls.

No.

Snap out of it.

Get out of there. Go- run. Do something.

We can't stay here.

We can't LEAVE THEM HERE.

HER ICE CUBE.

"F-Fanny...?"

HER-

"BRACELETY!"

A plug tail slapped against Bracelety's arm, snapping the object back from the prison of her own mind.

Even with the rushing tension from the trial, Fanny knew that her friend- well... acquaintance- had the tendency to let her mind rise above the clouds, trailing her farther and farther from the reality that both were cemented within. It grew more frequent once they broke free from the prison that was the TLC, yet she never understood what went on behind those eyes of hers.

Confused, Bracelety rubbed the cloudiness from her eyes, noticing that they were at the steps of the lab's entrance. "W-WAIT... WEREN'T WE-"

"Pencil kicked us out for now," Fanny uttered with an eye roll. "Told me she needed to talk with the 'highest members of the jury' about their next batch of suspects. I hate how ridiculous this trial is- seems like they're taking nothing SERIOUSLY here!"

"CAN WE BLAME THEM?" Bracelety exclaimed, "YOU REMEMBER HOW EVERYONE REACTED TO THE NEWS- IT'S HARD ENOUGH TO TRY AND KEEP CALM ABOUT THIS WHEN THERE'S A TROWEL-WAVING MANIAC ON THE LOOSE!" Positioning her arms in the air, she waved them around, wildly pretending to stab at the air surrounding them.

As stupid as Fanny found it to be, it couldn't help but bring a smile on her face. "Alright, that's enough. Let's get some fresh air- the

tension back there was killing me."

The two let out a burst of hushed giggling, quietly enjoying the company that they each had amongst one another. At some points in the course of the past few months, there was a hushed guilt that poked at their hearts- questioning if their newly found friendship was worth growing, as it was planted beneath the roots of a haunting tragedy in the city.

Hell, Fanny knew how bad it had gotten to the both of them. Bracelety still wasn't able to recall what happened on the day they discovered their girlfriends.

But even through these hardships, they both had each other. And as much as Fanny hated to admit it- that was what truly mattered.

Both objects begin making their way through the city, wandering the endless maze of twists and turns as they pass one abandoned building after another. At her every gaze, Fanny's mind found itself trailing back to her girlfriend- making plans to visit every spot that captured her interest; once this all passed, of course.

The muscles in Fanny's jaw clenched, catching Bracelety's passing glance as they walked by an abandoned manufacturing plant. "YOU OKAY?" she asked, making the other girl jump.

"Just... thinking about Bubble."

Her uttered words make the others head tilt. "WHAT ABOUT HER?"

"I thought her nightmares were finally leaving her alone... It's been ages since she's had her last- well... breakdown..." Fanny's eyes fell to the sidewalk, "...But for the past few weeks... She's been growing more- agitated..? Scared..? I dunno- and I hate not knowing!"

"YOU DON'T ALWAYS HAVE TO KNOW," Bracelety replied.

"I should- especially after everything she's gone through! I promised her we'd meet again once we were out of that stupid box- but we all know how that ended!"

"...I DON'T."

Oh. Right.

Shaking her head, Fanny used her tail to give the other object a soft pat. No words were needed to console the other, as she returned the gesture with her usual, toothy grin.

Despite her bitterness, the electrical fan trusted Bracelety- as did she- to the point where both had the freedom to comfortably express their concerns. It may have started out with the mutual fear of their lovers' well-being back when they were trapped, but with time passing- she began to feel as if airing her concerns with the other might be enough to ease the aching tension in her heart.

But this was Bracelety. A labeled loud-mouth by the others, someone who wasn't afraid to defy against any obstacle that stood in her way. She was one of the objects who fought day and night to bust out of the TLC- and if Fanny chose to open up about Bubble, there was a slight chance that the news could spread.

She already overheard the accusations that brewed up back in the lab- the last thing she needed was for a friend to side with them.

Yet, was it worth keeping this anxiety hidden away?

Fanny sighed. "Bracelety- can I talk to you about something? I really want this to be kept between us, and us only- unless something happens."

"SURE!! I'M ALL EARS!!"

"...We don't-"

"-AAAND MY LIPS ARE SEALED! PROMISE!" Bracelety did a little 'zipping' motion over her lips, causing Fanny to glance aside awkwardly.

"...Ok... well.." Taking a deep breath, the object kept her voice low, "...I'm not sure if it's just me- but Bubble's been acting... off... in a lot of ways. It's starting to really get to me."

"DUH!! SHE'S BEEN ACTING SO TENSE," Bracelety hummed, swaying her hands along her sides.

"I know there's some stuff she really doesn't want to look back at- hell, memories she might not want to bring up ever again- but... I dunno... I have the feeling that she's hiding things from me."

"MAYBE SHE'S HIDING A SURPRISE! A 'THANK YOU FOR BEING THE WORLD'S MOST AMAZING GIRLFRIEND' PRESENT!"

"I HATE surprises! Especially when this is clearly something that ISN'T ONE! Bracelety, I'm being serious- I'm worried that this tension of hers might make her snap one day!"

"OR POP? OR EXPLODE! SHE IS METAL, AFTER ALL!"

Ok. Maybe there were a few things that Fanny couldn't open up about to the object.

Lifting her tail up in defeat, the object spoke. "Ok- you know what. I'm gonna head back to the lab for a second. I need a drink."

"BUT ALL THEY HAVE IS WATER?"

"...Exactly."

Bracelety grinned, waving goodbye to Fanny as she began to skip off. "SEE YOU LATER!!"

"REMEMBER- THIRTY MINUTES!" Fanny shouted, grumbling under her breath as she kicked a small pebble from the sidewalk. There was no way in hell she'd have the chance to talk about anything that was getting to her.

Especially if nobody around would take her seriously.

She mapped out the trail back to the lab in her mind, no longer taking in the abandoned mysteries surrounding her. She wasn't sure if her worries about Bubble reflected the worries she had for herself; would she be the one to shatter before her girlfriend does?

No- come on Fanny, get your shit together here.

If anyone was going to stand up for Bubble- it had to be her.

There's no chance to fall apart.

She passed the corner of an abandoned shop, the charred remains of the LIVE Hotel plucking into her line of sight. With the sun making its path across the sky, its rays of light shimmered upon the bushes and dandelions that dared bloom amongst the city.

Walking amongst the ashes, the sound of voices made her head perk up. It may have been a few feet from her, but in the distance, a tiny little flame skittered across the road, babbling incoherent nonsense as he threw an accusing finger towards the object who frantically scurried after him.

It had been a minute since she had last spoken to Marker and Firey Jr.- after all, their individuality was restored the moment the first ray of sunlight struck through the TLC- but...

"Hey- Marker! Wait up!"

To clear the racing minds from the pressure of the trial, the objects in the lab found themselves wandering off, getting a chance to breathe and reset before the next phase of this 'investigation'.

Nobody expected for things to kick off bizarrely- but they forced the energy to stay, reminding themselves of what was at stake.

Pen wasn't sure if it was the stress of losing his two best friends, or the looming sense of doom that crashed over him like a tsunami, but he found himself struggling to keep himself standing. The air around him felt hot and cold, and the itching at the core of his throat brought a cough or two up from the depths of his chest.

As Eraser watched his boyfriend lean against his shoulder, his heart ached. "I think this mess is getting to you, Pen... you're burning up."

"Can we go home..?" the taller object sniffled hoarsely.

"We can't. TB told us we need to be here for this entire thing- maybe I can ask if he has something to help you with this-... cold..?"

"Sure doesn't feel like a cold..."

Shuddering, Pen wrapped his arms around himself in an attempt to keep warm. Eraser wasn't sure if it was him, or his imagination running rampant, but his eyes captured the faint, scarlet-hued dots that sprouted on the back of his hands.

"Holy sh-..." He stopped himself, carefully taking his boyfriend's hand to get a closer look. "...What are these-... dots...?"

Forcing a smile, Pen chuckled under his breath. "Maybe it was because of all those berry smoothies I had the other night, haha...!"

"Pen."

The two boys conversed, their words drifting off in the mixture of seemingly endless talking that circulated within the lab. Whilst Basketball carried a box of unopened crayons back to the little table where Rocky awaited her, she passed Coiny, who clamped his hands together nervously as Fries's words went into one ear, and right out the other.

It wasn't until the object turned his back, when Coiny made a mad dash to the stairs, leaving the lab as quickly as he could.

Peering over her shoulder, Bubble pouted at the coin-creature's sudden 'escape' from the lab, but she shook off the bitterness that crept up her chest as she stepped into- what she could only assume was- Golfball's office.

Being the final one to enter the room, her hand instinctively reached back to close and lock the door- until it suddenly swung open, nearly throwing her off her feet.

'UGH! What heathens- doesn't anybody around here remember their MANNERS?!" Bubble flinched at the sharpness of her tone. Startled, she turned to see what the issue with the door was...

...Only to be met with the all-familiar glare from Lollipop.

"If you don't *mind,"* she began, forcing the door open to let herself and Pillow through, "...We are *trying* to make an entrance here."

"Hm- I don't think so! We're here with evidence!" Pillow sang, happily wandering into the room as her arms folded neatly across her chest.

The softness in her voice might have brought a sense of comfort towards the soap bubble, but the words stung like salt in an open wound, catching her off guard. Confused, she looked back towards her friends, nervously digging her nails into the skin of her upper arm.

"E-Evidence..? Oi thought it was just supposed to be us?"

Whispering. Flower squinted, nervously pulling Ruby back as the gemstone covered her hushed words in her hands, passing them along to Ice Cube. Tennis Ball's eyes glazed Bubble's posture, suspicion flooding his spirit as he took in every sign of possible guilt in the object.

"Well," Pencil began, her hands resting firmly amongst her hips, "I know we said that this'd be an 'alliance member only' thing... but Match overheard the conversation those two were having, and figured that it'd be best to let them join in here."

"We have names, you know." Lollipop scowled.

"Right- thing 1 and thing 2, how could I forget."

"Bitch."

Usually, Bubble never let any backtalk take place within the alliance- she'd always flinch from the mere thought of it- but, for the first time in her life, she agreed with what Lollipop said.

After everything they endured- surviving Pin's wrath, coming across one body after another- the people she held so near and dear were now tossing her under the bus.

All because of two objects they never had the chance to properly meet.

Her jealousy now haunted her, more so than ever before. Shaking, Bubble balled her hands into fists, taking a pained step towards the woman she had come to look up to.

"O-Oire you guys- blaming me..?!"

"No, no! We'd never do such a thing!" Pencil lied through a gritted smile. "We just- want to give everybody in the court a fair chance at speaking, here!"

"You guys saw how that ended minutes ago- we hoive a better chance at hearing out people we OICTUALLY KNOW!"

"Hey. We know who these two are," Golfball interrupted, angrily stomping up to Bubble's face. "And if we're going to get to the bottom of this- it's best if we take any tips and advice from EVERYBODY in the city."

"B-But-"

"GB's right, Bubble." Sighing, Pencil's eyes shifted towards the doorway. "...We can't keep playing around anymore- we have to take these accusations seriously..."

No.

"...Even if it means-... well... accusing *you*."

"M-Moitch? Ruby?" The shivering soap bubble fought to get the names past her lips, her eyes soon meeting Ice Cube's.

She never forgot the way life drained from them. "Oicy..?"

"...I'm sorry, Bubble. But- we need you to go."

All she needed was that hushed voice of hers for something to break in her mind. With her fear now steaming into a flaming anger, she didn't bother to say another word, angrily grabbing the doorknob and swinging it open.

As she passed Lollipop and Pillow, the shorter object gave her a playful wave goodbye- yet the taller woman fully stared at Bubble,

her eyes piercing through her gaze. Around the corners of her mouth grows a faint smirk, her head tilting to watch as she silently trailed out of the room.

The door didn't even have the chance to close before Bubble's name left that wretched mouth of hers. She took a few steps away, pressing her 'ear' against the wall until a loud bang was heard from the other side.

"We know you're there Bubble! You can leave now!"

Hearing Pillow's tone twisted Bubble's stomach into knots of anger. There was something bitter about being tossed aside- left behind by the people someone moved mountains for. An object could give someone the stars, ensuring their happiness and safety over their own- yet still be tossed aside and forgotten, as if their sacrifices never mattered in the first place.

Perhaps this was all she was good for. Bubble always found her pathetic life to flash before her eyes; dying and coming back repeatedly numbing her to the harsh environment that intoxicated the world around her. All she ever wanted was to play alongside her friends- before this mess came to be- yet it seems as if that wish was too much to bear.

Because now, here she was. Trudging back into the main room with an aura of shock, anger and terror radiating from her very soul, craving to be within the room where the discussion was happening.

And to add the cherry on top of this disaster? She was alone.

Not even in her final moments mere months ago, did she cross to the other side on her own.

Passing the rows of chairs, her thoughts came to a halt. *'And where do you think you're going off to?!'*

Anywhere but here. I'm not wanted- and I can see it, clear as day.

'Do you really think that's a good idea?'

Not unless you have a better suggestion.

'Hmm... I do have my hands tied here, dear. I forgot how tedious multitasking can be~'

Multitasking? What are you talking about?

'Oh! I thought you already knew what I've been up to, hun!'

Not while I'm being left behind.

She giggled. 'Keep that head of yours up, dear. I know it can hurt- but soon enough, they'll all get a little taste of their own medicine. Well... more like- the taste of a new infection.'

My heart skips a beat at her words. I debate asking her to clarify- until she guides my eyes to the objects that surround me.

I suppose the one good thing about being on your own is how invisible you become. I stand in the center of the room, as the world continues to spin- familiar faces talking amongst one another, laughing, whispering, sharing moments that were once familiar to me. It takes a second to catch the red boils that are faintly appearing on Pen's arm.

Originally, I was sure that it was just Basketball who caught some sort of mystery illness from the city. But as a faint red glow emitted from her- from Pen- from Bottle...

What are you doing..?! I ask.

'I wanted to ensure that this was able to be... properly completed... before I told you- but I'm quite close to its success! You see- the closer we get to the completion of my garden, the more I gain an influence on the world around us! Back when I first started out- oh, it was completely out of my sight, hell, I wasn't sure if I'd ever make it this far. But now?' She held back a giggle. 'I can make things... MUCH easier for you.'

So you...-

'Yep! With every passing vessel I've ever had, my strength has rejuvenated. And with you being the one way ticket to my freedom, well... I've been able to expand our little plan to everyone here. Just watch!~'

"And why should I believe you?"

'I'm familiar with this pattern, darling. It's quite tedious... and if you don't do this soon? I'm afraid your precious Tree will be forgotten all over again.'

Shivering, Bottle sunk into the corner of the closet, holding her head as she tried to block out the voice that spoke to her. "I-I-"

'Time is of the essence, hun! If you do as I say... you can reunite with him, once more.'

"...You promise..?"

'I promise.'

A promise that was too daunting for Bottle to ignore. Her fingers hesitantly brushed against the handle of the axe, her heart sinking with every crevice that she felt. She was too scared to try and pick it up; the sins of this action burning into the damned weapon, never to leave her or her friends, ever again. She wasn't sure if it was real, but she had spent too much time listening to the tiniest sounds in order to figure out whether it was a product of the world around her, or her own imagination.

It was neither. She knew that now.

"How do you know what happened to him," she whispered, pulling her hand away from the axe. "Nobody knows where the others could be.."

'That's because the others are stupid.'

"No they aren't- don't talk about them like that!"

'But it's true, is it not?'

"NO."

'I'd say otherwise, darling. Don't you remember how careless they were when it came to Tree's disappearance..?~'

The mere mention of his name was enough to make her flinch. "No-th-they had no idea, I can't just-"

'Even if they didn't have a clue, they never offered to help you search through the city. All those hours, lost into oblivion, while Tree is lost... yearning... aching for the day where you and everyone can finally save them all.'

"No.." Bottle's words were now vanishing in the void that swelled in her throat. "I.."

'Who knows how long it's been... I've gotten to take a good look at his state- and boy... I don't think he'll ever return to being the man you had fallen for all that time ago.'

It's just a lie. It's a lie, it's a lie. Her eyes darted nervously around the room, trying to find a way to-

'It almost seems like he's forgetting the tune that you both had shared together too... did you know that he sang out for you..? As best as he could, at least...'

Her body froze, her hands snapping towards the axe.

'..The blood in his throat makes it really hard for everyone to hear.~'

Bottle couldn't pinpoint when the chill ran down her body. Her mind begged her to steer clear from the weapon, yet her hands had gained a mind of their own, as they snatched the axe from its resting place, forcefully turning towards the doorway that led her back towards the others. Her neighbors.

She had to be quick. Hide the axe. Save it for the right time.

...

Her friends.

Friends that cast her aside. Friends that didn't bother to help.

If she did this, all her troubles would have finally been worth it.

She'd find him. Find all of them.

Tree.

"I'm going to save you, Tree.."

Staggering back, Bubble rushed up the stairs, the abandoned buildings zipping by as she sprinted far from the lab. Her laughter echoed like a broken record, haunting her as she desperately fled the scene to avoid *her* influence.

She knew it wasn't enough. But if she didn't step out...

Who knows how far it could've gone.

Desperately running across the notorious trail, the soap bubble tried to feel the wind that brushed her face... wishing to feel something real, something to guide her back to the reality she had lost so long ago.

But no amount of wishing could stop what ensued. This was happening. Whether she liked it or not- this reality was the one she was trapped in.

And once the familiar sight of the garden peeked into view, Bubble comes to understand what she's felt- after so long.

It may not have been anger, or jealousy- no.

It was fear.

Staring at the carnage, a current of tears rushed into Bubble's eyes, finding herself sinking onto her knees before the familiar blue and

green book that laid before her. She wasn't sure how long she stayed here for, yet the broken apologies united with the sounds of death that circulated amongst this damned plot of land.

What more was there to do?

Curled up on the soft patch of earth, Pin struggled to doze off. She didn't remember how she ever could. With the whispering growing like roots in the core of her brain, she fought to look for any comfort, not wanting to scare the only person who cared for her away.

It might have been mid-day, but any sense of exploration was wiped off the table of her own opportunities, as the paranoia screamed in the most damning ways possible.

But the winds grow louder, and the rustling leaves sing their usual hymn, a few fluttering by the entrance of the cave- brushing past the familiar coin creature, who gasped for air, stumbling into the shade of the cave.

"F-Finally!!" He gasped, clutching his chest. "Ugh- that run took forever..."

Coiny's words force Pin's fears into an abrupt stop, as she shot up, confused as to how he had come back to her once more. "Coiny?!"

"S-Sorry, sorry! I know I said I was gonna see you again tomorrow- but I need to talk to you!"

"Couldn't this have waited until after you were finished back there?!"

"That's the thing," Coiny reported, quickly taking a hold of his girlfriend's hands, "...It's about the thing GB wanted us to do."

"The favor?"

"No- a trial."

From the way his reassurance melted into her own hands, to the worry that shimmered in those golden eyes of his, Pin shakily tried to move away. "I-I- no- this isn't- I'm not-"

"No no no! Pin, it's ok- I know it's not-"

"No place is safe," she whispered, tears stabbing at the corners of her eyes as her hands ripped away from his hold, clawing at her own head. "O-Oh my pin factory- did they find out?! Do they know I'm alive?!"

"They don't, and I'll make sure they never do. But that's not the problem- i-it's about what you went through."

His words make Pin want to sink back beneath the surface of the earth, letting the pits of hell split open and devour her once more. But those days of running away and pretending are over. She knew it more than anybody else. Of course, the hushed whispers weren't helping her case- but her heart raced with an emotion she had nearly let slip away from her grasp.

Care.

Not just for Coiny- but for every object she knew, back in the city.

She was convinced that after finding solitude amongst the towering forest, she'd be the lone wolf of the city, a survivor that hid amongst the shadows and watched from afar.

Someone like... well.. Leafy.

Pin's heart ached slightly. How long had it been since she thought of that name?

Even after all the months that had passed- countless hours of regret, tears and sorrow- she felt an overwhelming sense of accountability for the others.

Friends? No- others. All the apologies in the world would never make up for the damage she had done. She forced herself to let go of any kind of miracle that popped amongst her imagination- from the others welcoming her back, to them understanding that it wasn't truly her doing.

...

Was it?

No- it wasn't.

Shaking her head, Pin let the silence envelope around the two, giving a closer listen to the sounds surrounding them. Seconds passed, and with the whispers becoming mute underneath the winds of her own racing heart, she clutched Coiny's hands close to her chest.

"I-I was hesitant on telling you everything- but it had nothing to do with you." Pin whispered, "...I just- wasn't sure if you'd believe me."

"After everything that's happened- it's something that'll help us stop this mess." Coiny reassured her, leaning in to leave a kiss on the side of her face, "...I'm all ears, captain."

Taco lost track of how long she waited for Lollipop, but passing the time wasn't too much of an obstacle. She spoke with Gelatin, keeping him from snatching a piece of Fries's last fry, yet seeing the familiar purple pop walk in her direction never failed to make her heart flutter.

She got up, but was immediately nudged aside as Gelatin sprang to his feet, skipping excitedly towards the object. "Heeeyy Lollipop!!"

"Well hello to you too, Gelatin." She smiled, giving his head a friendly 'pat'. Next to her, Pillow walked along with a sly smile, tapping away at her own chin.

"I think that went pretty smoothly," she hummed, "...don't you, Lollipop?"

"Absolutely. I think we made our points fair and square."

"You mean, fair and ROUND." Gelatin snickered, poking at her head.

"...That could've been better."

"I know..."

"Lolli..." Taco spoke, her heart fluttering ever so softly as the sight of those brilliant, purple eyes turned towards her. A warm smile blossomed on the taller woman's face, carefully nudging the others aside as she tenderly cradled Taco's face.

Her expression instantly melted into that of a flustered grin. There was no need for any reintroduction, for Taco knew what came next. She let her eyes flutter to a close, feeling her girlfriend's lips interlocking with hers within a quick, enamoring kiss.

A good second or two ticked by, and despite Gelatin shielding his eyes, Lollipop pulled away, chuckling under her breath. "Missed me..?"

"You know I always do," Taco smiled, placing a hand over her girlfriends, "Besides- I've been waiting with this guy for a good while now."

Gelatin scoffed, a hand dramatically slamming over his own chest. "Well, *SORRY* for keeping things fun around here!"

"And what's your definition of fun, again?"

"...touché."

Laughing, Taco eased into Lollipop's arm as she felt it wrap around her. "So, how'd it go back there?" she asked.

"As well as you could imagine... ugh. Everyone knows how stubborn that pencil can be. I think I'd rather die than try and spend another minute with her."

"...So.. it-"

"It went well. Golfball was skeptical- but she at least listened."

"The *real* skeptics were the others in the room!" Pillow chimed, "It was a little funny to watch- they just couldn't believe what we had to say!"

"Hm, you can say that again Pillow. Going on and on about how 'Bubble's life is special', and how 'she was the one who stopped Pin.' They're just not seeing past the lenses of their faltering friendship."

"Having friends was their first mistake!"

"...Why do you say that?"

"...Hm. Not too sure there- but with a little research, I'm sure I can find out why!" Pillow giggled, happily skipping away from the group. "A heart can be wounded in many ways- more than a simple knife to the chest!"

Although the three stared with puzzled eyes, Pillow quickly wandered off within the lab, searching through anything she could get her hands on.

Folders of past experiments? Not what she needed.

Notes about things the scientists have made? Useful...

A map of the city? Bingo.

This lab was a fantastic place to start. But if there were any hints that'd aid in this case, she figured it'd be best to search outside, rather than in.

There had to be more that met the eye, after all.

She had the time. Might as well put it to use. Shutting every drawer

she had roamed through, Pillow frolicked back up the stairs, passing the group that she had left behind.

Though, they paid no mind to what she was doing. For Gelatin was nervously rubbing the back of his head, trailing away from the two objects he had come to see as his closest friends.

"I dunno, guys..." he mumbled, "What if she's right? I appreciate everything... but..."

"Now, Gelatin, I understand the concern here. Pillow did have a point- but that doesn't reflect on us." The purple lollipop gestured towards herself and Taco. "We're your friends because we care about you, Gelatin- we're proud to see just how far you've been able to come. And as long as I'm here, you both will always have someone who will be by your side. No matter what."

With these words, there was a slight pinch of uncertainty in her mind. She didn't want to speak up about the unease that had festered over the past few days, but even with this, she refused to give into the cowardice.

It was worth more to count her blessings, after all.

But when the sniffling caught her attention, she looked down, noting Gelatin's smile wobbling across his face as he fought to keep a few tears of joy in.

"Aww, Lollipop..!!" He laughed, opening his arms for an embrace. "C'mere you guys!!"

"Don't push it. Don't you-"

Lollipop's words trailed off once the green jello pulled both her and her girlfriend into a tight embrace.

"Eugh- what did I say..." she murmured. Giggling, Taco let her arms wrap around the two, and the corners of Lollipop's mouth twitched into a slight smile.

"We'll get through this together, you two... I promise."

'And here's a prime example as to why promises shouldn't be kept!~'

I... how much of an influence do you have...?

'It's hard to say... but, thanks to you? I feel as if my 'powers' grow every passing day... I've already gotten a few infected, after all.'

But what about-

'Yes, yes. Let's help you remember... now...'

"So- the voice continuously pushed me to do everything... from the cage, to.. well... all that followed afterwards... Does that make sense?"

Pin gave an apprehensive smile, wringing her hands together as her boyfriend stared at her with whitened eyes. She wasn't sure if he truly believed a word she said- or if the gravity of it all was hitting him harder than a bag of bricks.

"...You're telling me- this was all because of a voice in your head..?" questioned Coiny.

Giving him a slow nod, the thumbtack quickly pointed at a small drawing on the ground- a similar, wide eyed leaf staring at the two of them- and he snapped his fingers.

"Ohh- so it was her?!"

"Not exactly... it's both..."

Coiny gasped. "There's TWO OF THEM?!"

"Uh- no. One of them-... she's... I don't even know how to put this into words..." Pin whispered, nervously glancing to the side. "...I'm just scared that- they'll hear me..."

"Interesting... gosh, Pin- this isn't something you should hide away from- we have to help you!"

"I don't think the others would be too keen on helping here," the thumbtack uttered, "Not after everything."

"But don't you see, Pin? This is your chance- OUR chance, to bring you home!"

Seeing Coiny's smile glow with hope, washed Pin away in a current of guilt. She wasn't sure how this man saw the world in her- when the world was practically tossing her into orbit.

But hearing the sincerity in his voice, the passion of the mere probability of bringing her home...

...

How she wished she could believe him.

"As much as I appreciate your effort, Coiny..." she noted, her gaze falling to the floor, "...I don't think that'd help our cases here."

"How come?"

"Do you think they're going to believe ME? 'Hey everybody, sorry about murdering you in cold blood back then- it was just the voice telling me to do it!'"

"But this is a lead, Pin- it's something that might help everyone figure things out! What if whoever's behind this is going through the same thing?!"

"It's not worth to fight it- not with her." Pin shuddered. With a firm grasp, Coiny held the back of her hand up to his still beating heart, not wanting to give into the possibility of hiding away for good.

There had to be a better way than this.

They deserved a happy ending- just as much as the others.

"Please," Coiny pleaded, squeezing her palm carefully, "...let me help you back. I-I know I've messed up a lot beforehand- but let me do something right for once, and let me bring you home."

Home.

....

What is home?

It surely wasn't back in the city.

Not anymore.

"Coiny..-"

"H- Here- you can still stay! I can tell them everything you told me- just to give them time to digest it..?"

"...Maybe you should go back... they might be looking for you."

Oh, how Pin hated to see the optimism dissipate from her boyfriend's eyes.

She rushed to keep his hands in her hold, and with a shake of her head, she explained, "I-I'm not saying no to your help. I promise- I appreciate you making an effort on bringing me back, but..." She bit her tongue, "...maybe we should give this a little more time... this trial already sounds tense enough, and the last thing we need is for *you* to get accused."

"Psh- why would anyone accuse me? I'm a real charmer here- wouldn't hurt a fly!" Coiny scoffed.

"...You brought me back."

"And? If that's a crime- then let them bring out the guillotine!"

Watching as his boyfriend stood vaingloriously, Pin gave into the urge to smile, quietly snickering as his arms carefully took her into his hold.

They may only see each other once a day- but the tranquility that bloomed through her veins whenever she found herself being held by him, was an exhilarating sensation that she always found yearning for.

Smiling, Coiny leaned in for a kiss on the lips, revitalizing himself in the enamored connection that illuminated the two in their times of darkness. He caressed her cheek, his heart melting at the sight of her leaning into the palm of his hand.

"Thank you," Pin whispered.

"Wh- I should be thanking you here!"

The thumbtack shook her head, easing themselves back onto their feet.

"...You've done- all of this, for me. I just wish I could have the chance to return the favor."

"I think you being here is enough of a fair exchange to me." Coiny kissed the back of her hand, letting her go as the two of them made their way back towards the entrance. "Maybe after this blows over, we can settle down together. You know... get a house of our own again."

"You mean it...?"

"Of course... having the chance to grow old with you is nothing but a dream come true."

He pulled her close, pressing his forehead against hers with a loving smile.

"So. We'll talk about this tonight when I come to visit again?"

"You bet," Pin assured, giggling as he left another kiss on the side of her face.

"I suppose I'll see you then," he avowed, not taking his eyes off of her precious beauty as his feet led him back towards the entrance. "Oh- and I also found these new chips at the shop? I've got to bring them tonight, you're gonna-"

BAM.

Colliding against another, Coiny fell back, rubbing his forehead with a pained grunt. He felt Pin rush to his side, yet her movements came to a sudden halt.

"Ah- hey?! What gives! I-"

An object with sorrow and rage looming over her very being, stood at the entrance of the cave, sending the coin back in a stumble.

Bubble.

Any crumb of confidence fled Pin's body. The scar that tied around her 'neck' like a haunting noose throbbed at the sight of the soap bubble, and her legs moved before she had the chance to process it, forcing her against the wall of the cave.

Clawing, scratching at its rigid grooves, she grew desperate to find anything she'd use to fight. But before she caught something sharp enough, her eyes widened as Bubble slammed Coiny to the ground, knocking the air out of his lungs and crushing his wind-pipes with her foot.

"Oi knew it." The soap bubble hissed through gritted teeth, "You- you brought her BACK! HOW COULD YOU?!"

Pin struggled to form a proper sentence, rapidly sorting through the ideas in her mind as to how she can fight back, but it's no use. Something about the other woman forced her to cower beneath her vengeful gaze, until a wretched voice made her blood run cold.

'Long time no see, my dear!~'

"Y-You..." Pin tried to approach her, but the voice spiked into a scream.

'STEP ANY CLOSER- AND HE'S DONE FOR. We wouldn't want the others to learn about your appearance here... do we?~'

She pressed down harder, forcing a pained croak from the coin creature.

A sound so painful, it made something within Pin snap. She lunged forward, tackling the other object to the ground, but she was met with resistance...

A resistance that screamed familiarities to her. Bubble lifted the thumbtack with no struggle, tossing her back into the cave before she scrambled back onto her feet. Shuddering, Coiny let his lungs take in waves of fresh air, not hesitating to stumble towards her with his fist poised in the air.

Nope. Not this time.

Grabbing his fist, Bubble swung him around and held him tightly by the wrist, refusing to let him out of her sight.

The three- no, *four*- stood there, staring at one another, wondering who'd be brave enough to take the first swing, but the three seem to be on the same page. Confused. Angered. Emotions running high without a gram of clarity.

But Pin broke the straw of silence that rested on the atmosphere's back.

"What are you doing?" Pin whimpered in between her sobs, shakily backing away from the cave's entrance. This didn't stop Bubble, as her grip on Coiny's wrist grew tighter, a faint crunch breaking from the hold.

A pain so indescribable, yet similar, Coiny bit back a scream as his legs gave in, leaving him to crumble to his knees. He breathed out incompressible begs, pleading to the soap bubble to at least let his

lover go.

There was no way to understand why Bubble had grown violent- but Pin gasped out in terror, rooted in her spot so as to not agitate her any further.

It wasn't until the following words escaped Pin's lips, when she saw the familiar scarlet hue rising from her. "W-Wait- why are you-"

"J-JUST LEAVE HER ALONE!" Coiny screamed, leaning against Bubble to try and knock her down. "THIS ISN'T HER FAULT!"

'Are you sure about that, Coiny..?~'

That voice...

"Coiny?! Coiny, what's wrong?!"

He had heard it so long ago. He was sure it was just a lost nightmare from the past.

"Let us go- f-for pin factories sake, let him go-!"

'Oh dear... you know I can't give you that, darling.'

"I'M BEGGING YOU!" Pin screamed, thrashing against the hold that the leaf had against her. Coiny managed to stutter out her name, tears and ooze running down her face as she looked in the direction of her beloved.

"Pin," he rasped out, "...It's okay.."

"NO! IT'S NOT, SHE'S GOING TO-"

"I hear her." Her heart beat so fast, she wasn't sure how she wasn't keeling onto the ground from a heart attack. Was this relief? Terror? A confirmation for herself, reminding her that this wasn't even her doing?

"Coiny.." she cried out, resulting in a hush from the coin creature.

"We'll make it through this, together.." He grinned, spitting out the

blood that flooded his mouth.

No.

No, she couldn't. This wasn't what she fought for- Pin had done everything in her power to ensure the consequences of her action wouldn't find him.

Yet, here they stood. With Death at their doorstep, all Pin could get out was a faint, "You promise..?"

"Of c-course, captain.. You compute.."

"We both-"

"We warned you." What was supposed to be Bubble's voice- now twisted in a horrifying combination of old and new- rang in Coiny's ears, as Bubble's eyes drifted back towards Pin.

Coiny didn't have the time to scream out for her- as the menacing red leaf emerged from the darkness. In one swift motion, her claws stabbed through Pin's shoulder blade, the object's body twitching from the impact as she was lifted from the ground.

A crack. A sudden flash.

And Pin's vision went dark.

With the changing seasons, a plethora of undiscovered secrets melted back into the presence of Yoyle City.

Many of the objects who walked off paid it no mind- but a select few didn't hesitate to rummage through the abandoned trails and buildings, wanting to know more about the abandoned home that

they were now a part of.

Whilst Pillow walked aimlessly, her eyes came across a golden sign that shimmered from the beams of sunlight above; the words "Science Museum" engraved on its smooth surface. Moss and vines snaked around the corners of the sign, carefully guiding her eyes to the doors that stood ajar.

Seems like a great place to start, if any!

As Pillow carefully stepped through the doors, a familiar blue ring skipped by, noting the way the leaves fluttered in the breeze, luring her gaze to the changing hues of the trees surrounding the towering buildings.

She smiled. There was nothing more beautiful than nature itself, and as she took in the changes that blossomed through nature, a sudden red hue caught her eye.

Red?

No.

Bracelety blinked. Her gaze focused, and the red hue seemingly structured itself in the darkness. A shape- round, pointy?- took its form...

Eyes...

Wait...-

"Bracelety?"

Ice Cube's voice made the poor ring jump. She turned, a smile growing as she caught sight of her friend. "Oh- ICY!!"

"What are you doing here..?" Ice Cube questioned, tilting her head towards the diverting crowd. "Come on, it's almost time to go back! I was going to meet you after we were finished with GB, but you weren't back in the lab!"

"WH- BUT CAN'T YOU SEE THE RED THING OVER THERE..!?"

"What red thing, Bracelety?"

"THAT THI-.. oh.." Her words swept away with the breeze, as her hand lowered from the twisted maze of trees before her. She wasn't sure how- but the red shape had vanished, just as quickly as it appeared.

Frowning, Ice Cube stepped towards her, giving her a gentle nudge. "Uh... Bracelety..?"

"...Nevermind," the blue ring murmured, nervously glancing aside. "Come on- let's catch up before we're left behind..."

"We've got all the time in the world, Bracey- let's just head back... we can look around while we do so."

"Bracey- I-Is that my nickname?"

"Hm? Oh- yeah... I know it's silly- i-if you'd like me to call you something else, I-"

"I LOVE IT!!!"

"Hm. What an interesting one.

"I'm sure Scarlet would love to hear more."

Pin opened her eyes, then squeezed them shut again.

The light- or, what was left of it- was agonizing. Her head throbbed, a searing discomfort ripping across her skull. She wasn't sure if she was upright, or laying against the ground, but her body flashed from hot

to cold.

And the indescribable pain ripped through her chest, the moment she regained her consciousness.

She sat still, memories blinking in and out of her mental haze like fireflies in the darkest hour of the night. She blinked away the tears, trying to remember what occurred before the pain made its presence known once again, her pupils shrinking with every shift she made.

A pained grunt popped through the surface of the blood that oozed down her mouth. She tried to give her head a turn, but this proved to be futile, as the pain itself made her groaning spike into shrieks.

It wasn't until she took note of the towering trees above her, when Bubble stepped into her view, a piercing, red glow coming from her body.

'Well, good morning to you too,' the voice snapped, the usual song-like sound dropping into a brutish, demanding tone. Pin knew it wasn't Bubble- for her lips were sealed into a curved frown.

She struggled to form words in the sea of her own blood, yet the voice laughed.

'Don't move too much, dear! You're our greatest achievement here yet... Evil Leafy, be a dear and move her next to that book, will you?~'

"Yes, my Scarlet."

The red leaf picked Pin up by the back of her head, dragging her along the strangely familiar path, forcing her body upwards and leaning it against the side of-

Book...?

Shivering, the thumbtack fought to get her head to take a better look at the familiar object, but the smell of rot slapped her back into near unconsciousness. A faint gargle, and the sound of running blood gushed beside her, causing her to flinch.

Book.

It was Book.

The voices of both Evil Leafy and... *her*... chuckle, watching the realization dawn upon the poor object.

'There you go... now you both are safe and sound... forever~'

For a few seconds, Pin sat in a daze, struggling to get her hands up to her face. Maybe if she had the chance to rub the haziness from her vision, she'd have a better view of the predicament she was trapped in.

But all it took was one glance, and she noticed that they were gone.

Her mind blanked out, until the memories finally rushed back to her like the currents of a river.

The cave.

The talk.

Coiny.

Coiny...?

'Ohh, are you looking for someone dear?'

No.

'Don't sweat it, Pin... just look down- he's right there with you!~'

Their giggling, now booming into laughter, made Pin's eyes snap wide open. How she wished she couldn't have the strength to move- but there'd be no way she'd try and fight through this without knowing the fate of her lover.

Gritting her teeth to stop the pain from making her break, she looked down.

She wished she hadn't.

What greeted her was the sight of her open chest cavity, a wound that ripped from the top of her chest, all the way down to her lower

stomach. Flesh fragments dangled from the large wound, and despite the bloody hues of her inner flesh, the whites of her ribcage burned against the darkness that surrounded them.

Her innards- now having become her outards- gushed out of her flesh, splattering amongst the soil like a freshly broken egg.

That's when her eyes met his.

Inside of Pin's aching, slaughtered body, was Coiny- well, what remained of him. His body had been broken and snapped into pieces, with the top of his skull lying ever so neatly on the surface of her open wound. His eyes, although lifeless, remained fixed onto hers, slowly drifting away and back to the abyss of where they now remained.

How couldn't she have realized it sooner.

The Garden.

A new noise burst from Pin's mouth, part wail, part scream. Airing the despair that rooted itself amongst her soul stabbing the thorns of deceit deep into her flesh. There was nothing she could do besides squirm, struggling to believe that any of this was now her reality.

A reality she had never imagined- one she desperately tried to never come across.

Whilst the thumbtack struggled to process what now laid inside of her, Bubble stepped closer, her eyes glossing over as she was caught within the web of Book's stare. Her blue and green eyes narrowed, stabbing straight into the soap bubble's soul with a fire that burned brighter than ever before.

It didn't matter how long she had been trapped in that garden for; the indignation in her eyes never failed to diminish, always blazing even stronger than the last time she had seen them.

Book's mouth opened, but the voice spoke before her thoughts solidified.

'You should be thankful, you little brat. Now, Pinhead gets a little taste of

her own medicine- the same, foul treatment she gave to you.'

"Only worse."

'That's right, Evil Leafy!~'

"Book... Pin..." Bubble croaked out in the midst of their laughter. "Oi-"

"S-...Scar...let..."

Next to her, Book looked at Pin with widened eyes. Bubble's fists tightened, and she cleared her throat once more. "P-Pin-"

"Please," Pin heaved out, "Y-...You don't... have to do this... Scarlet..."

Silence.

The metallic soap Bubble wasn't sure what Pin was staring up at. She was sure those red eyes of hers were keeping their connection to her own, but her gaze flew right past her, staring into (what she could only assume), was the gorge of the blackened forest.

At least, that's what she wished to believe. Bubble knew Pin could see her, just as Book, and every other victim in the garden were able to. She was always looming. Watching. Standing over Bubble with her claws digging into the back of her mind.

But, for today, they remained outstretched, with one of them cradling Evil Leafy's hand in her own.

"Just... let them go..."

Not a word from Scarlet.

"Th-...They haven't... done anything..."

Nor a word from Evil Leafy.

"Please... Sc-Scarlet... E-Evil.. Leafy..." Her pleas fell onto deafened 'ears', yet this didn't stop the aching thumbtack.

She didn't care about what'd happen to her. They could keep her in this garden, for all she cared.

But the last thing Pin wanted was to watch the people she knew and loved, fall into this vicious cycle once more.

And as she watched the three turn, stepping back into the darkness of the forest, she called for them, crying for their mercy on the others.

Not once did she utter Bubble's name.

"And ever since then, I've been looking after him! I think it's going pretty well!"

"...Uh, Marker."

"Yeah, Fanny?"

"Junior just set another plant on fire."

"He WHAT?!" Panicked, Marker ignored Fanny's snickering as he rushed towards the smaller flame, yoinking him away from the now burning bush.

Of course, Junior was disgruntled by the gesture, flailing his arms and slapping at Marker repeatedly. "Really, Marker?!" he yelled.

"I'm not letting you get into any more trouble here!"

"Ugh- you're NO fun."

Laughter wafted through the air, as Marker nervously scooped the smaller flame back into his cap. Junior shot a glare towards Fanny, who shook her head, quickly recollecting herself amidst a few snickers.

After struggling to properly open up to Bracelety, Fanny didn't

hesitate to take some time to catch up with another TLC-er. While she wasn't happy with the behavior that Junior exhibited during the trial, she hated to admit that, well...

It was pretty damn funny.

Peering over her shoulder, Fanny's smile dropped as she caught sight of Bubble, watching her sprinting down the path to the new clubhouse. Her nails scratched desperately at her arms, seemingly scraping herself free from something unknown before she vanished behind a different building.

Fanny wasn't sure how long Bubble was gone for- or where she was coming from- but she didn't like it. "..Hey, Marker.."

"Ah- oh, I'm sorry Fanny!" Marker apologized, nervously grinning as he placed his cap back onto his head. "I-I'm sure that everything will be okay- you just have to talk to her!"

"Psh. How about you take your own advice here." Junior interjected, stomping on a weed that was emerging from a crack on the sidewalk. A laugh escaped Fanny's mouth, but she quickly covered it with her tail, as Marker struggled to hide the blush that was clouding his flustered face.

"I-I'm just a little shy! That's different- I need to figure out the right way to... actually tell him.."

"Tell who? Lighting? We all know you're gay, Marker."

"JUNIOR!"

Fanny shook her head, wiping her eyes with a chuckle. "You both are killing me here..."

"Don't word it like that!" Marker yelped, nervously glancing from side to side.

"Okay! No need to get that cap into a twist. Listen- I'll catch you guys around after the trial. I... gotta go check up on Bertha."

Smiling, Marker opened his arms for a hug, but quickly retracted at

the sudden squint from the electrical fan. "Ooh! Give Bertha a big hello from me!"

"And a big middle finger from ME!" Junior laughed, much to Fanny's dismay.

"Ugh, I HATE YOUR ATTITUDE! QUIT IT!" she shouted. Junior, not giving a singular damn about her, stuck his tongue out as she cleared her throat. "Uh. Sorry about that- I'll... see you guys later."

"Hopefully never!"

"Junior! Uh- bye Fanny!!"

Why.

The door to the newly found clubhouse ripped open.

Why.

She staggered inside, fighting for breaths of air as her sobs overpowered her.

Why.

Running into the bathroom, Bubble ripped the faucet knobs to the side, letting the crystalline water rush down her trembling arms. The pearly white sink faded into a rich, scarlet hue, forcing a shout from the petrified woman.

"WHY DID YOU MAKE ME DO IT?!"

'MAKE YOU?! WELL EXCUSE ME- BUT THIS WAS SOMETHING THAT NEEDED TO BE DONE!'

"O-OI ALREADY KNEW SHE WAS BACK- OI DIDN'T-"

'LISTEN TO ME, YOU PATHETIC RUNT. Those two were already on the cusp of trouble- Evelyn TRIED to keep their mouths shut, but- please. Not even I trust that stupid thumbtack anymore.'

"B-BUT OI-"

"Bubble?"

The corner of Bubble's mouth twists into a frown at the sound of Fanny's voice. She turned, quickly shutting the faucet off as she used the hand towel on the counter to wipe them dry.

But instead of a hello, Bubble's worries raced past her lips before she had a second to think. "Oi can't let them foind me." She repeated, "Oi can't let them find it- Oi can't-"

"Hey- what are you doing here?" Fanny asked, her voice softening as she tried to approach her girlfriend, "Everyone's heading back to the lab- I know they might be waiting for you back there."

"Oi can't go back."

Startled, Fanny blinked, taking a step back. "What...?"

"OI CAN'T GO BACK!" Bubble screamed, rushing past her girlfriend and pacing around their room anxiously. "F-Fanny, they're trying to blame it all on ME! After EVERYTHING oi've done, they want to say OI'M the one behind all this!"

Because I am.

Struggling to keep her cool, Bubble took a seat on the edge of her bed, murmuring underneath her breath as she fought to keep herself from breaking. Fanny followed close behind, and although the worry of her girlfriend's well-being struck at her heart, it wasn't long until the anger filled its place.

"Seriously?! Ugh- I HATE PENCIL!" she yelled, stomping her foot. "I KNEW she was up to something back there! Listen- I know you're scared, but if we don't go back, they're going to know something's off."

"Everything feels off, Foinny..." Bubble whispered.

"Well, yeah. With this shitshow going on, I can't imagine how you must be feeling. But we- ugh... as much as I hate it, we have to go back."

Bubble shook her head in defiance. The excuses piled up, filling her throbbing mind to the brim, but she forced them back, not wanting the other woman to suspect a thing.

She promised to protect her. She couldn't give that up now.

Taking in a trembling breath, Bubble looked up. "Oi wish we didn't have to," she whined.

As Bubble's girlfriend, Fanny was very much used to grounding her from her moments of panic. Time and time again, she put in the effort to ensure her well being, reminding her that the past was over, and they had nothing but the future to look forward to.

But if she didn't comply with what was ordered to them, then there'd be no future. And there was no way Fanny spent months, kicking and clawing at the metal walls of the TLC, to lose the chance of spending the rest of her life with the woman she loved.

"...Maybe afterwards we can come back and rest. I know you said you wanted to teach me how to bake... and I'm willing to try the recipe of your favorite cake- only if you'd like to..."

...

Fanny's tail flicked, as she let out a sigh. "Okay... what about just-having a movie night of our own? Come on Bubbs... Bertha misses you..." Fanny hesitated, fighting the tears that threatened to crawl down her face, "...I miss you..."

"W-Well, oi'm here now..." Bubble replied, "Oi promise, we can just-"

"I hate it when you lie to me."

A pang of worry hits the metallic soap bubble. She was growing irate- and Bubble knew it. She didn't want a fight to brew amongst the two

of them, but she didn't want to make themselves a target for the others to come searching for.

Especially when none of this was Fanny's doing.

Bubble brushed her hands nervously against her own scars. "Foinny-"

"Ever since we brought you back- you've been acting so weird around us. Around me!" Fanny struggled to keep her voice from rising, as she found herself drifting farther from her girlfriend, "I'm doing everything that I can here to help you, Bubble- but if you aren't telling me what's wrong? How am I supposed to know HOW to help you when I don't know what's bugging you in the first place?!"

"Foinny, Oi-" Holding back her rising tone, Bubble sipped in a steadying breath. "Foinny... Oi said this before- oi really don't want to go back.. Why can't you understand that?"

Fanny laughs in disbelief. "Understand- are you kidding me?!"

"Foinny-"

"For months, I spent every second of my time trying to make sure you could live SOMEWHAT of a normal life in the city. I lost sleep, making sure you had the chance to close your eyes without screaming your HEAD OFF every damn second! I know what happened wasn't your fault- but having me put in ALL the effort, just to keep this relationship going is making me..."

Bubble's nails dug into her palms, her eyes now fixed to the ground. "Making you what," she uttered.

"...Question if this is worth it." In an instant, the anger in Fanny's tone melted away, leaving something she never understood how to process.

Sadness.

"I... I don't know, Bubb- do you... even feel the same way about me?"

"Of course oi do," Bubble whispered, reaching for her tail to hold. But it snapped away, with Fanny giving her a frustrated glare.

"Then what gives."

"...Oi just don't know if I can face everybody again." Shaking, Bubble looked back towards a small mirror that stood on the desk, gazing into a reflection that she no longer recognized. "Oi saved them- oi was the one who dealt with everybody dying, and, heck- OI FOINALLY MANAGED TO KILL PIN!"

"And you have no idea how proud I am of you for that."

"THAT'S NOT SOIMETHING OI SHOULD BE PROUD OF, FANNY!" Screaming, Bubble shot up from the bed, her fist slamming against the counter. "THAT MOIKES ME JUST LIKE *HER!*"

"Oh Bubble..."

Fanny's softened tone broke into a blank chuckle.

"You already were."

The effect of Fanny's growing smirk on Bubble is immediate, sending the tears to stream down her face. "No- no, Foinny- not you too.." she cried in between her racing breaths.

Yet, Fanny laughed, calmly stepping out of the room. Her voice echoed from the kitchen, as she was heard shifting through one of the cabinets. "Come ooon, Bubbs," she called, in a voice that wasn't of her own, "You knew this had to happen eventually- but now?"

Walking back, Fanny's eyes shimmered with a red hue, her tail hiding

something behind her back.

"It's just us..." She said, blankly, "...it can always be... just... us."

Enraged, Bubble broke free from her frozen state, beginning to march right towards her girlfriend. "LEAVE FOINNY ALONE, SCARLET!"

But Fanny hissed. "Is that any way to talk to your lover, Bubble? After she gave you, what- the WORLD? Tsk tsk..." Her tail then shifted, revealing the large chef's knife she had in its hold. "What a shame... all she wanted was for you to open up.."

"NO!-" Bubble shrieked, immediately stepping back. "N-no, please-"

"But look at what you've done."

The knife suddenly ripped through the air, nearly slicing at Bubble's face. This sent the object running back into the corner of the room, trembling uncontrollably as she cowered beneath the shadow of her dearest-

"How," Scarlet's voice, now hissed within Fanny's, echoed in Bubble's mind. "How could you do this to your own GIRLFRIEND?"

Following her cackle, the knife then took a turn, and plunged into Fanny's head. Once. Twice. Over, and over, a torrent of blood gushing down her opening skull. Brain matter shot in every direction with every thrust of the knife, and after a fatal stab deep into the side of her face, the red hue in her eyes vanished.

What was left?

A hollow expression. Confusion. Pain.

The grip her tail had on the knife loosened, and she fell onto the ground with a hard thud, flesh, skull fragments, and brain matter splattering from the impact. Her eyeball, which dangled by its connecting vein, snapped free, dropping into the pool of blood that grew beneath her.

With the floor turning into a rich red, the liquid reached the area where Bubble stood, causing her to stumble back in terror. The color

drained from her face, her thoughts racing at a million miles an hour as she tried to make any sense of the situation.

No. No, no.

This wasn't happening.

It had to be a joke- it's always been a sick joke with Scarlet!

Then why isn't anything changing?!

No.

Following her gaze, Bubble stared at the knife that intertwined amongst the wrinkled remains of her girlfriend's brain matter. A whine emerged from her mouth. She didn't want to look- there was no way this was happening. She promised to keep her safe, the whole point was to ensure her girlfriend's safety.

But she couldn't leave her there. Not like this.

As Bubble stepped towards the body, her hand nervously clenched the knife-

Wait. Knife..?

Trembling, her pupils fall to the bloodied weapon in her hand.

'You.'

The blood, now splattered into a macabre painting of dying roses, now stained every part of Bubble's face.

'How COULD you.'

No.

No, NO NO!

Throwing the knife across the room, Bubble used every ounce of strength to keep the rising scream shattering past her gritted teeth. She ran to the bed that they once shared, digging a blanket into her flesh to let the cloth absorb the sins that were now attached to her, much similarly to the scarlet letter.

The sickening sound of a dying gargle made her movements come to a stop. Shivering, Bubble turned back towards Fanny's body, her blood running cold as she found her remaining eye staring back up at her.

She found Fanny struggling to breathe, her tail twitching as it shakily outstretched towards her direction. It stayed in the air, her lips shivering as they tried to spit out her name.

Life never left those dashing eyes of her that fast. As Fanny's tail gave into gravity, it fell, her eye rolling back as her struggled breaths sank into the other side.

And just like that, Fanny- the girl Bubble had fought like hell for- was gone.

TINY EDIT: ofc bfdia drops the same day as this chapter, bitches rlly wanna be me don't they (hey! This is indeed a joke!)

only 240 days until halloween, yes i am counting and yes i believe summerween should exist.

i know i said i liked valentines day but halloween takes the number one spot for the best holiday. i love scary stuff. I just like horror!

BUT hi everyone, I am. really sad. Things aren't looking good for me at all. yeah it's because of this chapter but also my mental health has been at an all time low! and also uhhh real life!!!!!! cue the confetti

this chapter had to be one of the hardest for me to write. it stands at 11k words, and i know the most ive written was 15k... but i've been burnt out since MAY so getting back into this for these three four chapters is a little bit strange.

other than that, i hope everyone is doing okay

see you guys then

-ice

Folie à Deux

There was no longer any time to spare in Bubble's mind.

Something Scarlet never bothered to warn her about: the barren roads of free time that stretched for miles, with no end in sight. On the sides remained the blood of her victims, drying up in the sunlight as her so-called friends obliviously passed by.

She was never prepared for this moment of desolation, followed by bloodshed, running, and then time. Time as blank as a sheet of paper.

It was here where the soap bubble scrambled to clean the messes she left behind. Well... almost, all of the messes.

Why bother cleaning up after Blocky?

Now, something had changed within her. She remembered walking through these streets, the comforting chatter of her alliance keeping the haunting silence at bay. How she wished times could be as simple as then.

For now, she silently staggered back to the lab, her skin glistening from the stray droplets of water that trickled with every movement she made. No matter how much she washed, or how hard she scrubbed, nothing was able to remove the blood that now haunted her very soul.

She walked, waited, her brain tuning in and out of the previous moments that unfolded.

Cradling Fanny's wheezing body.

Adjusting the satchel with the glowing meteorite in its center.

Desperately whispering apology after apology.

What good was a 'sorry' for.

Look at where love got her, in the end.

Bubble flinched. Apologies had gotten her nowhere- at least, that's what Scarlet once told her. Never in Bubble's life did she picture herself becoming the source of another's pain, hiding the blood that seeped into her soul, leaving behind a bitter sting of guilt.

Yet, here she was. Laying her girlfriends body amongst the blooming bush of blue hydrangeas, her blood clashing violently against the hushed vibrancy of their petals.

Enough tears were shed, for there was no time to mourn. *'Go,'* Scarlet hissed, *'Let Evelyn take it from here. You must go back.'*

At the name, an abrupt choking sound came from Pin, who squirmed within her spot in the garden. Bubble didn't want to believe that she could hear her too...

But after everything, how could she not?

And there began the grueling walk back to the lab. Returning to the faces she had once seen as her friends- those who tossed her aside for the opinion of objects they've barely come to know.

...I suppose Book and I weren't so different after all.

'Now now- lets not reminisce on that tombstone of ours, dear! Book is no longer an obstacle, and you are finally on your golden path to victory!~'

And all of this... really happened...?

'Of course! You cleaned up, brought the body back, and returned to the lab without a second to spare!'

No... That didn't-

'Don't try to deny it, Bubble... you did what every vessel of mine had to do. It's the hardest step, I can't deny that... but it's the final step for you.'

I killed her... just like that? Without-... anything...?

'No no. We had your back, dear.'

Then if- all of that happened... Where did I go from there?

'Easy! Why don't we take one final look...'

When the streets grew desolate, Bubble made her descent down the stairs, the sound of chattering wafting through the atmosphere. Every word slipped in one ear, and out the other, yet Pencil's voice was quick to snap her back into reality.

"Let's get a move on, people!" she exclaimed, watching as the remaining objects took their seats. "We don't have all day!"

"What's with the rush," Puffball yawned, sleepily lifting herself from Fries's carton. "Aren't we still waiting on people?"

"No. We chose to have a few of them leave." Pencil rested her face on the palm of her hand. "Figured it'd be best if we didn't have too many distractions around here."

"But they still could've given you some advice?" Donut asked.

"Psh- what advice. Last time I remembered, you guys were stuck in a metal box while we were trying to survive."

"Oh that's ridiculous, Pencil. You guys were the ones coming down to visit us-"

"Ah ah- not you!"

"It's still the same thing! Ugh- for a second I thought you learned some form of empathy back there, but you're still as incompetent as ever!"

"Look who's talking!"

"Oh for bakery's sake- don't you dare come crying to us if the

murderer is still going at it after-"

"Okay, that's enough from you two," Tennis Ball interrupted, carefully dragging Pencil back to the podium. She put up no fight, yet her eyes screamed with endless rage as they were locked onto Donut's, who shook his head without a care in the world.

The tension in the room became thick like butter. Sighing, Golfball stormed across the two, breaking their exchanging death glare as she cleared her throat.

"We have three more accusations to get through," she announced, "And for this purpose- we excused a few objects to avoid any interference similar to the ones we've had before."

"If there's anything you'd like to mention," Tennis Ball added, "please do not hesitate to speak- but if you're going to try and drive us in the wrong direction, we won't hesitate to kick you out of this lab."

"Mhm!" The enthusiastic nod that Rocky gave was enough to nearly crack a smile out of Golfball. Basketball, who sat beside him, hushed him ever so quietly, not wanting the little one to interfere with the scientist's efforts at handling the situation.

He usually tried to go against this- but for the sake of his aunt, he nodded, returning to the drawing he had been working on before. The smaller scientist noted this, with her partner stepping forward, giving her a gentle 'hug'.

"Are there any questions?" he asked, his eyes scanning the crowd for any curious eyes that struck out to him. With nobody arguing against the two, the smaller scientist nodded, stepping forward.

"Alright," she began, her eyes shimmering with confidence amongst the reflection of her glasses, "Let's not waste any more time here. Leafy, would you mind stepping up to the third podium, please?"

Bubble didn't have to turn to watch the way Leafy's expression fell, the color of her face draining into the soles of her feet. "E-Excuse me?" she stuttered.

"Am I not making myself clear?! I said get up here! NOW."

Petrified by the demand, Leafy instinctively turned towards Firey; any doubt she had disappeared at the sight of him taking her hand, defensively standing up from his chair.

"No way!" he shouted, much to the others' frustration, "It can't be Leafy!"

"Quit the knight in shining armor act, Firey. We've got our reasons to suspect her," Pencil accused, her eyes narrowing towards the lemon leaf.

"No you don't! I bet you're just saying this because of the whole Dream Island Incident!"

"Do you seriously think this is about the island, Firey?! This is a matter of LIFE or DEATH- and if you don't let us get on with this investigation, then we'll have no choice but to lock you BOTH up."

Now, Bubble couldn't hold back from turning to look at the two. She took note of the hesitation that caught the flame by surprise, and she knew that flashbacks of the cage were flickering along with those flames of his. Nervously, he clasped his hands over Leafy's, and not a single word was exchanged; for the reassurance in their gazes held the confidence and comfort that they needed to endure this.

She walked up, taking her place behind the stand with her head held high. Despite the nerves, she reminded herself that there was nothing to be afraid of.

No matter what anybody else had to say, she was innocent. This wasn't her first rodeo of being hunted down, after all.

Once settled, a head nod was exchanged from the lemon leaf, and the smaller sports ball walked forward.

"We all acknowledge that Leafy is one of the previous victims of this massacre," she began, "but after several noted disturbances amongst the city, I've come to speculate that the woman has succumbed to the traumas of her past- giving into her anger, and letting her actions fester as a form of revenge for the mistreatment she's experienced over the past few years."

Tennis Ball walked up next to her, chiming in. "And after speaking with a few of you- we have many reasons to believe that she is a potential threat to us all, being responsible for the many disappearances we've seen in the city. Lollipop? Pillow? Care to kick us off here?"

'Oh. So she's the one pointing fingers around now, hm? Are you really going to let her slander your name once she gets to you, my dear?'

I...

'Look at what they're going to do to Leafy. I'd get those doubts out of the way quick, dear.'

Wringing her trembling hands together, Bubble glared at Lollipop, who swiftly stood up from her seat. Taco grabbed at her arm, her eyebrows scrunching together worriedly.

"Weren't you going to speak out against Bubble?" she whispered.

Lollipop pouted. "I am- she wasn't the only one I had my eye on, here."

"But-"

"Relax," she uttered, giving her a quick kiss on her forehead, "...I've got this under control. I've got my notes- now all I need to do is present my case."

Pulling away from her girlfriend's hold, Lollipop made her way towards the front of the stand, her venomous glare seeping into Leafy's anxious-ridden soul.

"I'm sure *none* of us are surprised by who we have standing behind the podium today," the purple pop began. "...Goodness- where do I even begin? Backstabbing, betrayal, jealousy and robbery, all melting into the boiling concoction of this woman's past."

"Ok, was the wording really necessary-" Leafy's uttered words fell into oblivion as Lollipop raised her pointer finger, silencing her with a sharp hush.

"After everything all of you have had the misfortune of experiencing- you may be wondering how somebody like Leafy could possibly be responsible for this mess. But your desperation for vengeance has cusped your eyes with rose colored glasses, for the red flags seem to vanish whenever any of you interact with her."

"I thought it'd be pretty obvious to you all; it's fascinating how many knives she carries around on the daily!" Pillow tapped in, her eyebrow lifting as she looked towards Leafy. It was no shock to say that the poor woman was appalled- after all, she fought Pin until her own death! No way would she let herself slip into this kind of madness!

"I'm not the person behind all of this- y-you CAN'T just SAY something like that!" she stuttered, a hint of frustration bubbling in her tone.

"Well, if you aren't, Why do you keep your little collection of knives on you at all times?" Lollipop asked.

"They were for my survival."

"More like your way of murdering. You attacked our friends and tried to brush it off as NOTHING."

"THAT WASN'T THE CASE!"

"I can agree to that!" Pillow's statement caught the others by surprise. Blinking, Lollipop's hand lowered, her head tilting to the side as she gazed down at the shorter object.

"I- what? Pillow, are you serious?" she asked.

"As serious as ever! You see, I managed to find a particular file that caught my interest- I'm sure that many of you will find it to be JUST as important!" Waving around a handful of folders, Golfball quickly noticed the familiar handwriting that was etched into their labels. The "CLASSIFIED" stamp screamed familiarities, and it was enough to make Golfball's heart skip a beat, filling the hollowness with a sense of disgruntlement.

"HEY!" She shouted, stomping after Pillow. "Those are classified

documents- MY classified documents!"

"I know!" Pillow giggled, calmly waving the folders over the scientist's head and watching as she tried to reach them.

"QUIT IT! What on earth do you think you're-"

"After looking into Golfball's Zelatonin file, I found that everyone who wasn't in the TLC got a dosage of the medicine before the rest of us did! And since it failed rather predictably- the effects of its psychosis must've caught up to Leafy before hitting everybody else!"

Angered, Golfball aimed her leg to kick at the object, before Tennis Ball stepped in between the two, carefully dragging the other object away. "If that's the case," he acknowledged, "...there should've been others who suffered something similarly!"

"And that's where our next accusation comes in!" Pillow's sickeningly, sweetened smile grew ever so wide as she met face to face with-

"Bubble, mind if you come and join us up front?"

Every muscle in Bubble's body suddenly hardened like concrete. She struggled to move her feet, her gaze darting around the room for any sign of comfort that may ease her from the panic that bloomed within her heart. Making way to the podium was growing impossible with every ticking second, yet she felt her body gliding across the room with ease, no longer being controlled by her own fear- or her, in general.

How she wished she had the ability to distinguish which one of them was in control.

'What's with the hesitation?' Scarlet questioned, guiding her hands to the desk of the podium with a sharp movement, *'There's no need to panic, dear!~'*

They're going to find out.

'Oh, don't be like-'

They will. They know- all of them know. Who knows what they said in

that room back there- everybody I know is suspicious of me, and now that Fanny's gone, I-I-

'Who ever said Fanny was gone...?~'

What..?! I-

'See? You're becoming desperate, Bubble... keep your frustrations and fears at bay. They run their mouths to compensate for the tiniest brains they exist with- you'll have your chance for a rebuttal when you hold their bloodied innards in your hands. Do you understand, my dear..?~'

...Yes.

"Wonderful! Now, why don't we try and pretend we're interested in their pointless banter? You and I both know that they'll never amount to anything in their lives, after all~"

I blink, my ears slowly tune back into the world around me. Pillow's voice was the first to greet her mind, her eyes quickly adjusting to the present.

"...Even after all of this, she was the only one who returned that night. Nobody knows about Book's whereabouts- *except* for Bubble. This should be raising alarm bells for all of you, but frankly, I'm interested to hear why you trust this one more than your own intuitions!"

"What makes you think a literal bubble is doing all of this? We can barely trust her enough to be a damn hero around here!" Eraser murmured, rolling his eyes at the accusation.

A spark of anger nearly ignited Bubble's slumbering rage, yet her body eased with the feeling of a ghostly claw, tracing against the top of her head.

'No need for that, now!~' Scarlet sang, *'All is under control here.'*

What do you-

'There's no point in listening to what a man- especially THAT one- has to say. What would someone like him know about you, anyway..? He's just

as much of a brute as that BLOCKHEAD was.'

Scarlet-

'Frankly, men are VILE, FILTHY creatures. Women are venomous ghosts who hide behind the pearls of their shining teeth; your kind is beyond saving, my dear. It's high time someone like ME came in to put you all out of your pathetic misery.~'

But- we all didn't-

'You all didn't, what? You all aren't that way? Spare your breath- my mind had been set since the very beginning. Now get to it, Bubble.'

At her command, her head lifted upwards, silently taking in the words that were tossed all around the room. She let her gaze wash upon the sea of familiar faces, noting the empty seats that reminded her of the excusal of the objects that weren't of any interest.

...Well... more so to prevent anymore incidents occurring, like the previous debacle that took place before their break.

Bubble's gaze soon caught onto Pen, who was coughing as silently as he could into his hand. For a moment, he looked down at his palm, his eyes widening in alarm at the small, scarlet-colored blister that formed in its center. It was clear that his boyfriend was too busy to take note of his well-being, so he shook his head, nervously balling his hand into a tight fist and resting it on his side.

A few chairs over, Bottle twitched in her seat, growing unfocused and distant with the case at hand. She bounced her leg, the pace rapidly increasing as her nails clawed at every inch of skin she reached. Her eyes, glossed over with unfamiliarity, shot around the room like a bullet, and the corners of her mouth twitched into a slight scowl at every face she came across.

One faint giggle from Scarlet, and she shot up, a sharp gasp emitting from her mouth. Both Pie and Woody were quick to check in on her, but her gaze remained the same, with a quick, red twinkle glimmering in the corner of her eye.

Following this, Bubble's eye shifted to the right, and her blood ran

cold, seeing Fries and how his gaze continued to loop from the door, back to the empty seat beside him. He knew where Coiny had run off to, and frankly, he wouldn't have cared- it was at his risk after all- but the aching pain in his chest amplified with a warning that refused to go unnoticed.

He itched to leave the lab. Something in his soul screamed at him to do so, shrieking with a haunting familiarity that he never wished to recognize.

Something was wrong. With Coiny...

Or with... it.

With her.

As he gripped the edge of his seat, Puffball noticed his fidgeting, carefully nudging a fry to the side and looking down with a quiet cough.

"Fries," she whispered, "...Is everything alright?"

"Everything's fine," he muttered, avoiding her gaze. The object shook her head, a noticeable pout forming on her face.

"Do you know where Coiny went-"

"I do. I'll handle it after the trial- we can't risk getting accused by bozo here."

"But he-"

"What's that, Fries?" The two objects jumped at Golfball's voice, their eyes flickering over as the smaller scientist stomped towards their direction. Swallowing his words, Fries quickly stuttered out a response, avoiding the anger that shimmered behind the scientist's glasses.

"Oh- i-it's nothing, Golfball, I was just-"

"If it really were nothing, you'd ZIP IT. Unless you have something you'd like to bring to the stand?"

"Well-"

"As a matter of fact, Fries- what was it like?" Golfball asked, pacing back and forth in front of the other, "...To be so foolishly blinded by your friendship with Pin- ultimately leading to your own demise?"

Fries flinched at her words. "W-When you put it like that-"

"What's to say you brought her back to-"

"GOLFBALL, THAT'S ENOUGH!" Puffball interrupted the scientist, her fuzz frilling up angrily at the woman's incompetence, "You and I both know that Pin's gone! NOBODY bothered reviving her- and I think it'd be best if we KEEP IT THAT WAY."

Suddenly, Match looked over her shoulder, pointing a finger in Fries's direction. "What's to say he, like, didn't?" she asked.

As nonchalant as Fries was, any ease in his body immediately vanished in the blink of an eye, as he quickly straightened out in his seat. "Match," he gritted through his teeth.

"What's the matter, Fries?" Golfball squinted, leaning towards Fries with suspicion, "Did she strike a nerve?"

"No. If you could use that so-called brain of yours, you'd know that she's accusing me of something absolutely ridiculous."

"I don't, like, hear a denial..." Match jeered. "Fries...?'

"I didn't recover anybody. There. Are you happy?"

"I-"

Before another word left Match's mouth, Tennis Ball nudged her aside. "That's it- we're getting off track here! We were all here for the recoveries- let's not spiral with these accusations here!"

'Let them spiral. Rip each other's throats out, even!'

Scarlet.

'Let's set the courtroom ablaze- or lock them inside until they have to fight to the death to survive!~'

Bubble flinched at Scarlet's laughter, her cackles echoing across every crevice of her skull. She wished to fight back- there was nothing left to protect, after all, nobody who Bubble was willing to risk losing for anymore- but there was something intimidating about the power that Scarlet had come to hold.

Of course, Scarlet's actions never had the chance to come to fruition. She remembered her mentioning the countless vessels she's had before her- before *Pin*- yet the voice found herself irritated by the lack of control she'd have since the very beginning.

With one vessel after another, she discovered abilities she had long forgotten. It was only with Pin where she recognized the ability to swap the souls of herself and her vessel, gaining full control over the fleshy prison she was trapped in.

But Bubble became a different story. There were days that passed where her body didn't feel like her own- and every waking thought was met with a sour reply.

And after discovering that she was not the only one who heard Scarlet, it was only a matter of time until her abilities were unveiled to the world.

Bubble squirmed in her seat, letting her hands lay flat against her lap. She exchanged a glance with Leafy, who, much like her, had an uneasy glare on the surface of her eyes, not wanting to come off as guilty as how the others labeled her.

Bubble never questioned how Pin was able to hide her monstrosities from the others. What she remembered, most of all, was the way she acted.

Act.

'You never needed to act.'

But it was how Pin-

'PIN IS DEAD AND BURIED, BUBBLE. There is no need to try and follow in her footsteps- this is your journey now, and you're finally the one I've been-'

"See? Just look at the way she's blanking out!"

Peeking around her shoulder, Bubble jumped at the sight of Lollipop, her words yanking her back from the mindspace she once called her own. As the object nervously rubbed the back of her head, the candy stick calmly snaked her way around her seat, grabbing the back with a firm swing of her hand.

"There is no way you people don't find this suspicious," Lollipop continued, giving the top of Bubble's metallic surface a firm poke.

Flinching, Bubble swatted her hand away. "Ploise don't do that." She sniffled.

"No need to listen to a potential murderer. I'm only doing my job- there's nobody left to protect the rest of us, after all."

"Nobody needs to be protected- because it oisn't me!"

"Spare us your denial. We have every reason to suspect it was you."

"It's not me," Bubble whispered, but she wasn't sure of it this time. When was it ever her holding the trowel? When was she trapped behind the bars of her own mind?

Watching as the purple pop paced around her made the metallic soap bubble dizzy. "O-Oi was the one who stopped Pin- oi gave my life to make sure she didn't get the rest of you. Anybody who's filling Pin's role again wouldn't think twice about making that koind of sacrifice-"

"Ugh, the sacrificing talk again?" Taco said, tossing an arm back in disbelief. "It isn't our fault that you died back there!"

"Oi never said it was!"

"Again, with the defensive tone! There's no need to shout, Bubble- we can hear you just fine..." Lollipop's words escaped in a single huff, ignoring the way Bubble's hands quaked with fury. She could feel the

blood rushing up to her face, her cheeks glowing as she struggled to keep herself from snapping.

But when one accuser didn't catch it, the other noted every occurrence down. Pillow's eyes squinted at the way Bubble's nail's dug into her knees, before spinning back towards the others, whistling in deep concern.

"As if that wasn't enough- you mean to tell me that *this*, the shorter object gestured towards Bubble's seat, "...is normal? What about the time she was found aiming a knife at her own girlfriend? Doesn't that serve as a warning to all of you?"

Shivering in her seat, wide-eyed, her hands now whipping away from her scar-covered legs, Bubble looks like something not of her fury- but an object that was at the edge of the spotlight. She swore to herself that she'd lay low, not drawing any suspicion towards herself throughout the trial, so why wasn't the trembling coming to a stop?

The room remained tense, hushed murmurs swaying from side to side. There were still some who clung onto the idea of Leafy being the main perpetrator, and others who were faintly noticing the cracks that etched on the metallic soap bubble's surface.

Eyes upon eyes stayed locked onto her, and the lump that swelled in her throat made it harder to draw in an easing breath. She felt the confidence trickling away from her soul, now expecting them to see right through her- to know of all the blood that now stained her soul.

But instead of being met with agreements, the room burst into a fit of laughter. Bubble sat, ready to air out her confession, yet the swelling chuckles and giggles forced her words back into the deepest corner of her soul.

Clearly, there was no need to try and go against their words.

Nobody believed them.

Nobody...!

"What are you people laughing at..?!" Lollipop asked.

"You're kidding, right?!" Gelatin cackled, wiping a stray tear from his face. "Are you trying to pin this all on someone who's as fragile as a feather?!"

"Don't you remember what HER recovery was like?!" Now fed up with the defiance in the lab, Eraser shouted, kicking a stray chair to the side. "She knocked Blocky's lights out! What's not to say she's done worse, huh?!"

"That was done out of self-defense..." Leafy interjected, a look of sympathy washing within her gaze as she gestured towards Bubble. "What did you expect her to do?! He was cornering her!"

"Not to mention the amount of times he's pranked her," Firey added.

"Or killed her," Fries uttered.

"Ugh- ok, ok. Point taken." Eraser growled, rolling his eyes in dissatisfaction. "But besides that- you can't deny the other points Pillow and Lollipop made!"

The statement made a lightbulb go off within Needle's mind. Now sitting upright, she pulled her hand away from Teardrop's gentle hold, tossing it into the air. "Wait- haven't you considered the fact that her behavior isn't that far off from our own?"

"Not everyone in this room is a genius, Needle. The hell do you mean by that?!" yelled Eraser, ignoring the bullets of annoyance that were shot through him by Needle's glare alone. She drew in a breath, restraining herself from knocking some sense into the other, before continuing.

"What I meant to say," she grumbled, "was that her behavior isn't any different than ours. All of us have had our moments since we were recovered; nightmares, visions, panic attacks... the whole, gruesome package. And the Zelatonin wasn't much of any help- it only amplified the symptoms it was supposed to get rid of."

As soon as the name was out of her mouth, all heads turned towards the two scientists, who were taken aback by the sudden shift. Golfball's eye twitched, clearing her throat before finding the proper

words to speak.

"...Excuse me."

The realization gives the others a surge of energy, as the suspicion made Flower approach Golfball, her eyebrow tilting upwards. "What do you have to say about that, GB?" she asked through gritted teeth. "All the medicine that you swore would help us?"

Scoffing, the shorter sports ball brushed the question off with a halfhearted chuckle.

"Come on, really?" she questioned, stepping back from the bloom's intimidating spot. "Why would I contribute to the already growing traumas of everyone here?"

"You'd just about throw any one of us under the bus," Pencil stated, her thoughts coming together, "all in the name of science, as someone like *you* would say."

"Now you're just being ridiculous. Haven't you all forgotten about the fact that I TOO was a victim here?!"

"Oh BOO-HOO," Eraser mocked, "Like that makes any difference! You're smart enough to repeat this pattern- and smart enough to figure out a way to HIDE it from the rest of us!"

'Now isn't this just interesting!~' Scarlet giggled, as Bubble nervously followed the arguments.

As much as the metallic soap bubble didn't want to agree with the voice's words, she was taken aback- shocked as the blame was diverting away from her with every person that spoke. She was petrified that her desolate moment of anger was enough of a dead giveaway, yet-

'What did I tell you, darling? Nobody would ever suspect such a fragile, sweet, heroic object like yourself!'

There's still a chance the blame can come back to me.

'And there's still a chance it can be diverted! It was like that pink,

bumbling idiot said- 'there's no need relying on you to save anybody when you barely saved yourself in the past.'

Save herself? Was it really Bubble's decision to try and save herself in that fight against Pin?

She never chose to corner her in the garden that day- there was nobody left around her, all of her friends being reduced to nothing more than a pile of flesh that'd be used as fertilizer.

She was on her own. After the fear, the stress, betrayal and despair...

There was nobody around, but her.

Swallowing her guilt, Bubble shook her head, winding down from the silence as the world around her plunged into chaos. It didn't take long for another accusation to solidify, as 8-Ball rolled to the side, suspicion fueling his words.

"Sorry- but it has to be Golfball. The evidence is as clear as day- she was going after all of us, rather than her 'friends'."

"And what do you know, 8-Ball?!" Golfball snapped, kicking her leg in his direction.

"What. I don't have any other suspect in mind- I really don't."

"I knew it." Flower laughed in disbelief, clenching one of her petals to refrain from doing something she'd regret. "And after we trusted you to help us- Golfball, YOU'RE the murderer!"

As much as Tennis Ball wanted to ignore their words- pretend that this scenario wasn't unfolding at all- he found himself breaking, shouting with such an intensity, that it caused the others to flinch.

"NO SHE ISN'T!" Turning to his girlfriend, he yelled. "GOLFBALL, SAY SOMETHING!"

"...You all are INSANE!"

"Incorrect- we're just stating the facts!" Pillow hummed. "And it's quite possible to believe that you're behind all of this- it was YOUR

meteorite that went missing. And it was YOUR medicine that drove everybody crazy!"

"Are you seriously going to take these idiots' words over mine?!" Golfball laughed through her rapidly twitching eye, "WHAT DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND- I'M. NOT. THE MURDERER!"

"Careful GB!" Pillow reminded, "We're going to have to remove you from the premises if you keep this up!"

"I BUILT THESE PREMISES! THIS IS MY LAB, AND THESE ARE MY RULES!" She then blinked, looking around in confusion. "Hell- why are we ALWAYS holding things here?! This is MY LAB!"

Tension hung heavy in the air. A sense of unease tainting the souls that watched and wondered, now doubting the trust they've come to have for one another. But even amongst the chaos that brewed within the lab, a familiar balsa slice perked up at a memory that struck his mind. He jumped from his seat, rushing towards the stand and whispering incomprehensible words- ones that Leafy was able to understand.

"That's it," she whispered, her eyes flooding with realization. Thanking Woody, she turned back, slamming her hands against the surface of the makeshift stand.

"Wait," she called amongst the crowd, "It COULDN'T HAVE been GB!"

Disgruntled, Lollipop crossed her arms. "What are you talking about?"

"Do you remember the hotel?"

"I don't think any of us would forget that night. But go on."

"Golfball wasn't at the scene when the fire started- but she was someone who was trying to help. At least, that's what Woody told me."

Everyone turned at the name, causing the poor guy to flinch at the eyes that now stared him down. He gulped, giving a hesitant wave towards the crowd.

Leafy smiled, going on with the explanation. "He was caught in the blaze- but he saw GB that night. She was trying to get out with Rocky- but she got caught under the rubble. She asked him to take Rocky outside instead-"

"And what does that have to do with anything?"

"How could she be behind all of this, when she was only trying to help everyone? Surely, she wouldn't have run into a burning building if that was the case! She would've left him behind- left EVERYONE behind!"

Woody nodded in agreement, nervously fidgeting with his fingers as he returned to his seat. Lollipops' lip curled, now realizing the sudden turn that the case was facing.

"Perhaps we should keep going with that fire, then," she sighed, "because that was more than a mere accident."

"Well- I was one of the people trying to help everyone escape... if that helps," Leafy said, "I know not everybody's here to agree, b-but... as I was guiding everyone out, I.. saw something strange." Lifting a hand to her head, the lemon leaf reminisced on the memories of that night, the striking red hue flashing amongst her memories.

"It was almost as if.. something- ran back inside.."

"A lot of us were trying to run back inside- you weren't the only one trying to help," Golfball rebutted.

"I-I know! I know! But-.. no other object was as red as this one. I'd hate to assume it, but... for a second, I swore it looked like-"

"-Evil Leafy.." Firey caught on, snapping his fingers as he met Leafy's gaze. "How could we have forgotten?!"

"It's not about, like, forgetting," Match sighed, "but moreso about remembering the real, like, threat. Although she's still around, she isn't, like... the one who killed all of us back then."

Leafy frowned, nervously clawing at the podium before her. "But she's still just as much of a threat- none of us know what she's truly

capable of, here!"

Not all of us, Bubble thought to herself, shifting her gaze away from the lemon leaf.

"And are you absolutely positive that it was all you saw?" Lollipop questioned.

"It was right before the explosion happened. Even if I did see it, I... I only noticed it for a second, right before.." When Leafy's voice trailed away, every eye in the room turned towards Bomby. There wasn't any hesitation when the whispers began, and the only thing he could do was cower at the weight of their angered stares, sinking into his seat with shame.

If anything, the murmurs were carried by those who recovered from the final explosion that he detonated. But what made his heart sink was the silent stares from those who had lost someone permanently.

Nervously bouncing his leg, his breaths quickened as he looked up. He noticed Liy, who glared daggers straight through his soul. Tennis Ball couldn't bear to look at him any longer, only being reminded of TV's death. He expected to hear an 'aw seriously' from David, but the poor guy stood in silence, not even sparing him a single syllable. And then there was Basketball; despite the illness that drained her from her energy, her glossy eyes stared lifelessly towards him. She didn't even mutter her name, but Bomby saw how the pain of her losses overpowered the physical pains that tremored through her body. She lost everyone she had come to know and love, one by one, and the missing presence of her own soul was enough to inform him of the aching grief she drowned in. Bomby knew that she was missing her girlfriend- knowing damn well that Robot Flower could've been standing here today if it weren't for the blast. His blast.

The whispers grew louder. Shivering, he tugged at his wick, Bomby's head lowered to the ground, his heart racing as anxiety poisoned his racing heart. He didn't mean to hurt anyone- bomb-factory knows that he never meant to- but no matter how hard he tried, nobody seemed to listen to him. They all treated him like a burden, a monster, the reasoning behind their troubles right now. And what he hated most about it, was how right they seemed to be.

Maybe if he hadn't been at the hotel that night, things would've been different. Maybe if he was more careful with his wick, then the mechanical minds could've had the chance to stand here today.

If it weren't for him, gosh- who knows how many wouldn't have their recovery scars burned into their bodies right now. Bomby didn't even notice his racing breaths, and as much as Leafy wished to help ground him from his noticeable panic attack, she forced herself to look away. She was on the chopping block here- and she couldn't risk getting herself exiled from the society that had finally embraced her once more.

She couldn't live in those woods again.

Please.

From the distance, Firey knew the desperation was eating away at her. His hand twitched to take hers in his comforting hold, to try and reassure her that this would work out.

But with their eyes making up for their distance, he spoke out. "It's okay, Leafy.."

"..I..It's just like old times.. haha.." She swallowed the pain in her voice as the memories of her exile flickered in her mind. Even after all this time, she hoped her mistakes would've served as a story of the past. Instead, she was now here. Accused. Untrustworthy.

But she wasn't the only one. Concerned, Nickel glanced up towards Bomby, giving him a consoling pat. "Bomby.."

"Nickel, please- they're never going to see me as anything but a weapon.." He looked down. "..I didn't want to hurt anyone.. I-..I couldn't even feel the flame.."

"I think we just need to let the fire go," Clock uttered, glancing towards the two. "It's caused enough pain already- no need for us to look back."

Next to him, Loser shook his head in reply.

"We were all killed.. we shouldn't-"

"And? We were recovered. It's as simple as that."

"Not exactly," Tennis Ball stated, making his way towards the front of the room, "Like Leafy said- that explosion wasn't any accident. From what I can remember- GB and I were in the lab when Bubble came to us about the fire."

"Wait- Bubble?" Ruby asked, frowning as she shot a confused glance towards Flower.

"Yes."

"We found out about the fire from Book..."

"That's because she was spending the night with us." Nickel worriedly adjusted himself in his seat. "W-Well- it was before we had a little... incident on our end..."

Bubble looked up. "Incident?"

"Yeah- she sort of reminded us about what happened in the past, with Pin, and the hands..-"

"If that's the case, why isn't Book's name up in the air?" Pen's words stifled in between a cough.

As the words left his mouth, Bubble flinched as Ruby slammed her hands against the podium. "NO!" she shouted, "IT COULDN'T BE BOOK! She's been through enough- s-she wouldn't try and-"

"Let me guess. Hurt somebody?" Golfball uttered, stepping closer towards Bubble as she inspected the now-fading bruise on the center of her forehead. "I dunno Ruby, that bruise on Bubble's forehead says the opposite."

"No.. Sh.. she couldn't..-"

"Believe me. It's hard to believe when something like this happens. But the quicker you let that love of yours go? The easier it will be to put an end to this."

Let go.

Easier said than done- at least, that's what Bubble believed for the past few months. She spent hours of her life, taking lives so that the ones she held nearest could have a chance at returning to any sense of normalcy.

She gave up her chance at healing, to save the one she loved.

And where did that bring her?

The more Bubble stared at her hands, the more the blood flashed as a vision- her girlfriend's corpse lying mere feet away, her eye still locked onto hers with disbelief.

Bubble's hands trembled, fighting to dig into her scarred palms. She lifted her head as the sound of Ruby's voice caught her by surprise.

"It was Book that made us feel whole," Ruby sniffled. "And unlike last time.. I.. I can't feel her anywhere... the way I felt Flower when she passed.."

Biting her lip nervously, Bubble caressed the back of her dearest friend. "Oi know.. o-oi did everything oi could to-"

"I mean, who's to say those two aren't killing? They are her girlfriends," Eraser interrupted.

That was when Flower snapped. "WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?!" she screamed, "We'd NEVER hurt anyone!"

"You'd KILL SOMEONE if they didn't call you pretty, Flower! Why don't you think before you SPEAK for once!"

Even as the fighting picked up once more, Bubble heard Scarlet scoff, her voice echoing beneath the craziness.

'Nobody cared about Book. Not even for a mere second. I don't get why these fools cry about her all the time...'

She was my friend.

'Oh, was she now? Perhaps you should've thought of that before stabbing her in the back again!~'

She didn't know why, but when Scarlet let the sentence roll off her tongue, Bubble found herself giggling. For a mere second, she swiftly turned her head to the side, holding her hand over her mouth, and covering the smile that painted itself over her face.

It didn't make sense. Mere moments ago, she found herself sobbing at Book's mention not being able to hear the woman's name without her heart aching. But she pulled herself together, swallowing the sickly grin that threatened to expose her to the others around her.

But a silence blanketed itself over the room, and the metallic soap bubble cleared her throat, quickly returning to the mess of the trial. She can't see his expression, but Bubble noted the tension in Eraser's fists, as they balled up tightly, the nails threatening to rip through the skin. As if he were trying to clutch onto any fragment of tranquility he had, he scowled towards Flower, stalking towards the bloom.

"Nobody's bold enough to say it, so let me speak." He scolded, "Book was always WEIRD. We've known it ever since she tried to join FreeSmart. She's pushy, she's controlling, she'll do anything to gain sympathy from any object around her. If ANYTHING, she's probably the one killing again."

"DON'T YOU SPEAK ABOUT HER THAT WAY!" Flower screamed, her petals frilling alongside her anger. Truly a familiar sight to everyone- as Eraser found himself unbothered, crossing his arms neatly over his chest.

"You're one to talk, Flower. I remember the way she glared at you when the recoveries happened... Hell, I'm surprised you weren't the first to go."

An angered yell echoed through the room, and Flower was yanked back by Ruby and Pencil, her flailing limbs making Bubble flinch. There was no way to tell if this damned trial had become a waking nightmare, or if it was reality itself- but now, it was growing difficult to differentiate the two.

Once the two separated, Bubble no longer recognized the voices that overlapped one another. All she heard was the beats of her petrified heart, with a piercing ring burying her beneath its pitch. It used to be

scary, but all it took was a few months for her to realize that this was enough to help her through her own dirty work.

"It's okay," she whispered to herself, "Oi'm going to be fine-"

"Are you?"

Such bitterness in both of those words, Bubble didn't need to turn to know it was Fanny. Or... what was left of her. Her blades had become jammed with the crooked pieces of her skull that protruded from her open wound, with chunks of flesh sticking onto its surface. One slight movement was followed by a hollow crunch, as the wound tore its way down the side of her face.

But was this *really* Fanny? She desperately wished to say yes, to turn her head and be met with the sight of the object. It didn't matter if she was gone- she was still here, still giving her the opportunity to see her.

On the other hand, she wanted to keep her gaze away. She couldn't give into the fake reality that took bits and pieces of her- after all, she wasn't sure if anything around her was real or not.

There was no way she had a chance of knowing.

Not with her.

Her face scrunched up with sorrow. "Fanny's dead," Bubble whispered as softly as she could.

The figure next to her grinned. "How am I here, then?"

"You're not real."

"Of course I am. It's just you and me now, Bubble."

"Oi.."

"Nobody can help you anymore. It'll always be *you*..." 'Fanny' giggled, her laughs gurgling amongst the blood that oozed down the corners of her mouth, "No matter how much you deny it... it will forever be-"

"ORDER! ORDER IN THE COURT!"

"IT IS A LAB, PENCIL!"

"LAB, COURT- SAME THING FOR NOW, BOZO!"

In the blink of an eye, 'Fanny' was gone. It took Bubble a second or two to readjust to the given situation she was in, but her eyes were met with the sight of an enraged Flower being escorted towards the back of the room, whilst Eraser was (pathetically) being led to his seat by his sick boyfriend.

Tensions ran at an all time high. With points being made against Leafy, Bubble- and partially, Book- nobody knew who to pin the evidence against.

And this frightened Bubble. Chewing on her 'nail', she averted the gaze of everybody in the room, not wanting to draw any more attention to herself than she already has.

But Scarlet had other plans.

'Hey. Don't bite your nails- you're making yourself bleed.'

How are you so calm about this..?! Aren't you worried they're going to blame me?

'I'm not worried in the slightest.'

Your confidence is really... jarring.

'That's because- unlike you, I know what I'm doing.'

You always say that.

'And this time, I can make up for my words. Watch!'

Unable to get a word out, Bubble's lips pressed together as Scarlet's laughter swirled around her. It amplified within her mind, and after a moment, the wind carried her sound into the atmosphere.

When the scarlet-hued mist trickled free from her body, Bubble had

no worry- for nobody in the room had the capability to ever see what was happening.

...Or so she thought.

For a brief moment, she wondered if she went off to taunt the ones who were sick, but when Bubble shifted her eyes to the side, she found Leafy staring straight towards the scientists. It's nearly impossible to decipher the expression on her face- but the way she reached for something on her side, made the woman follow in her gaze.

She didn't have the time to take in the sight of a bright, red leaf, before Leafy hurled a knife in Golfball's direction.

The sound of the knife's blade jamming into the wall made the smaller scientist flinch. Behind her glasses, her eyes shot wide open with terror- feeling a droplet of blood gliding down the cut she received from the near-fatal hit to the side of her face.

Before she processed the situation, Leafy leapt over the podium, kicking the ball hard in her side. The scientist fell back, a broken yelp erupting from her vocal chords, and the lemon leaf was mere seconds away from lodging the blade deep into her skull until a pair of arms wrapped around her own, yanking her away from Golfball.

"NO!" Leafy screamed, thrashing and kicking against Eraser and Pencil's hold. "NO- I- I SAW IT! I SAW HER! SHE'S HERE!"

"CAN IT, LEAFY!" Eraser hissed, "Ugh- is this enough proof for you idiots to finally make a decision?!"

"At this point, we have no choice!" Tennis Ball shouted, quickly helping his partner up as he shot a glare towards the panicking leaf. "I'm sorry- but enough is enough! We have to get Leafy under control before she goes on another rampage!"

Confused, Pillow watched as the crowd panicked, averting the lemon leaf's wrath as they scurried to use the chairs as makeshift shields. "So does this mean she's-"

"Yes! Make of it as you will- just BRING HER TO THE ROOM DOWN

THE LEFT HALL!"

"NO!! YOU GUYS DON'T UNDERSTAND!" Leafy's panicked yelling drowned out beneath the rush of those who ran to her side, ensuring that she had little to no chance of escaping. The ones who had lost someone all flocked to try and desperately squeeze an answer out of her, simply wanting to know the whereabouts of their missing loved ones.

And there Bubble stayed.

Dazed.

Lost.

Stunned by the change in the narrative.

As the mist settled back into her system, Bubble watched as Lollipop spoke to Taco, her arms waving around in frustration. Her words didn't make it to Bubble's 'ears', but her lips moved, the edge of her mouth curving into a dissatisfied frown. Taco tried to console the angered figure, but she pulled away, making her way towards the exit with a disgruntled shake of her head.

Bubble's legs lifted her from her seat, and she followed. While the others gathered around to figure out a proper punishment for the lemon leaf, she remained undetected, as Scarlet let out a soft hum of satisfaction.

'I told you I knew what I was doing. Now. Let's get back to business, shall we?'

Yes.

Infuriated, Lollipop trailed off into the city, rubbing her forehead with a deep sigh. She knew she was onto something when she presented her case- she was sure to observe every single move that bubble made.

She may have been a hero in her past, but there was something off about her- and Lollipop swore she had been right about this.

Yet, it wasn't the fact that Bubble didn't end up receiving the accusation- no, it was more of the fact that she was *wrong*. Blindsighted by her own confidence to see the crazed ways of the lemon leaf.

Guess she just had to learn how to take in this failure this time around.

Passing by a wooded area, the purple pop let her gaze wander amongst the trees that stood near the city, until the soft snap of a twig made her ease in her pace.

"I hope you're not here for an apology," she began, calmly brushing her hands against the side of her arms, "...Because I had my record straight."

Silence.

Letting out an angered exhale, Lollipop crossed her arms, turning to face the metallic soap bubble. "Listen- you have to admit it. You were acting pretty weird back there. I get everybody saw you as their 'savior' of some kind- but you're doing a pretty crappy job at keeping up that title."

WIth a clench of her fist, Bubble's empty eyes stared right through her. No word was given as a reply, much to the taller object's frustration.

"Hello? Earth to bubble-brain?" she called, her hand reaching over to knock on her forehead. "What- are you getting blindsided by the fact that nobody cares about you anymore?"

"OI HEARD YOU!" Bubble screamed. As Lollipop's hand flinched back, Bubble's hand slapped over the other woman's forehead, her nails digging into her skull before she lifted her from the ground, harshly slamming her against the back of a building.

"Do you think oi want to keep this up..?!" The metallic soap bubble gritted through her teeth, her hand wringing her head as tightly as

she could. "YOU THINK YOU CAN DO OILL OF THIS TO ME?!"

"B-BUBB-" Gagging, Lollipop frantically tried to claw at Bubble's arms, kicking and shoving to get her grip to loosen- to no avail. "P-PLEASE-"

"WELL OI WON'T LET YOU!" Bubble slammed her harder against the back of the wall. Seemed like the back of her head burst on impact, as a crater was now seen with her innards spilling all over her.

"N-NO-" she gasped out, "PLEASE!-"

"Begging won't get you anywhere," Bubble uttered, flinching at the blood that splattered on the side of her face. "Oi have a right to be angry too."

With a guttural roar, the metallic soap bubble yanked her forward, and she slammed her head against the back of the concrete wall; her screams hushed into a grunt, and that's when her body slipped from Bubble's grasp, collapsing onto the ground.

Agonized gargles and shudders echoed through the air. Heaving, Bubble stared at the purple candy pieces in her hands, the blood gluing the flesh fragments to her arms. Teeth and broken skull shards laid scattered amongst the ground...

'And that's how we left off, my dear!'

Everything that happened... it... it was all... real...?

'Very much so! And now, all you've gotta do is take this precious one to the garden- she's still alive and kicking, after all!'

Doesn't seem like it...

'It's the adrenaline, darling. Now come on- chop chop! Let's get to work!~'

THE PRESENT.

Shuddering, Bubble kicked some dirt and grass over the small pool of blood that collected itself on the ground. She ripped a handful of soot and grass free from the soil, scrubbing the wall free from any

bloodstains- keeping it as grimy as it once was, so nobody could ever suspect a thing.

That's when she leaned down, heaving Lollipop's seizing body into her arms, careful enough to keep her alive.

Little did she know that a special someone had followed the two, keeping herself hidden behind every abandoned crevice and tree she found.

Generally speaking, Pillow found the entire ordeal incredibly obscene. She stood back and watched, greatly interested as the emotions in the lab became more and more unstable; the supposed forever deaths towering on top of one another, one blood-soaked layer after another.

To see such a fragile girl like Bubble crumble beneath so much pressure was nothing new- it was expected of her- but the fact she acted that strange was another layer of... interesting... to her.

Very interesting.

And here, she knew why.

"Huh," she murmured to herself, "Looks like you were acting suspicious for a reason! I didn't mean to accuse *only* you back there- but I, for one, don't think you should be publicly hanged over this!"

Bubble stopped as she overheard Pillow's words, her tensed eyes rolling in her direction. "...Really."

"Mhm! Oh... Poor Leafy isn't going to last long, though..." Pillow sighed. "You saw how ready they were to rip her to pieces."

That disgusting bag of fiber never failed to leave a rotting taste on her tongue every single time she peered that foul head of hers into everybody's business.

'And don't you just hate that...?' Scarlet whispered, *'Don't you wanna see what happens to that curious little cat?'*

Bubble had grown completely out of it, lowering the body onto the

soft grass below.

'Get the job done, my dear.'

As Pillow felt the woman's gaze strike right through her, she jumped- rather surprised by this movement of hers. "Oh...? What's this now?" She smiled, quickly hopping back. "Are you gonna try and chase me down?"

'Quite the opposite, actually!'

Just like that, the metallic soap bubble marched over to the other woman. Pillow hopped and began to make a run for it, but she squeaked as the other woman grabbed her by the back of her head, forcefully yanking her back, and viciously grabbing her by her face.

"WOAH!" Pillow shivered, her legs trying to run whilst her mind seared with fascination. "Bubble-"

SHRRRRRRIIIIPPPPP.

With her untethered strength, Bubble tore Pillow's face open like a grisly present box. The sound of tearing flesh ripped through the air as each fiber and sinew was snapped apart. Pillow let out a horrid yelp- the pain was swift, but it bursted into an inferno of flames, as this metallic monster made sure to rip off her entire casting.

Miraculously, the entirety of her skin remained in one piece.

Pillow tried to shut her eyes- but they were now completely exposed to the atmosphere, her eyelids having been ripped clean off alongside the rest of her 'skin'. Her teeth were exposed like a permanent grimace.

All that remained of Pillow's new form, was a macabre mixture of exposed fluff and twitching tissue.

The poor woman didn't even have the time to think- to gawk, or to hypothesize at that moment- for all she felt was pain.

Searing pain.

"A A- AAUH- HEEA A A-" No words escaped Pillow's gaping mouth. Would she go into shock? She felt that possibility soon. Every second felt like an eternity, as the cold air stabbed at her with the strength of a thousand stabbing needles.

Bubble stared down at her handiwork, gripping Pillow's skinless body in one hand, and her outer casting in the other. The dangling object twisted in agony- for it hurt. It hurt so fucking much.

But deep down in her mind, behind those darting, wild eyes of hers- was wonder.

A soap bubble like this had such incredulous strength... enough to nearly crack a block's face open like a seed... and now? She skinned her completely from head to toe- without a knife.

'Wow... I admire your strength, Bubble. But I especially admire how much you knew what I wanted.'

It's what had to be done.

'It is, indeed! It's the sweetest taste of victory you will ever receive. And to think... this is only the beginning- after all, you've taken care of so many! The final step you have to take in order for our garden to become a cemented success... is to kill Book.'

Wait- Book..?

B-But I thought I-

'Oh. You thought this was all real, didn't you...? How could I push a wondrous vessel like yourself to do all of this at one? Sweetheart, open your eyes...'

Bubble looked down- the blood that once painted her body, gone. The two corpses out of her view, having never been here in the first place.

It wasn't real. No.

'None of this is real.'

Frightened, Bubble turned towards the woods, but something had changed.

The trees stood taller. The buildings, trapped in an entanglement of roots and vines. Even the atmosphere had shifted; what was once a brilliant yellow, with clouds that lazed by, had tainted into a deep red- one as rich as blood. Dark, gloomy clouds replaced the cotton-like ones, now drifting across the hellish atmosphere.

And in Bubble's hands, was a small, cracked pot, with seeds buried beneath the freshly earthed soil.

Yet, in the middle of these contents, a hand stood out- dangling lifelessly as dried blood stained its sides.

Scarlet... h-how did we-

'Oh... you thought we were being serious here? No, no- this was all just a mere... test!'

Her body, no longer under her control, made its way around the garden, wandering through the thick fog.

'From what I've come to learn," Scarlet began, *"You vessels are all quite attached to... something. Well- more like, someone! Every single one of you always claims to have some sort of connection with another object you hold near and dear to your heart- that being, a partner, a friend, even a family member! But with love, comes weakness.'*

As the garden of hands came into view, Scarlet's voice dropped to a whisper, letting Bubble gaze upon the lifeless fingers that dangled like the branches of a weeping willow.

'I was quick to learn that once this attachment was broken, any vessel was much easier to guide! They became less attached to the world around them- less concerned about the consequences- and they'd drive right into action, getting closer and closer to the garden that will ultimately free me.'

Corpses now decorated the blank areas of the garden- only this time, they were alive, their pained eyes following Bubble's every move. Quiet wails and agonized sounds echoed from their hollow mouths, repeating the same words like a broken record.

"Help."

'And you, my dear- have yet to reach that goal.'

"Get us out of here."

It was there that Bubble realized where she stood. A small corner, where a rotting body now blossomed with blue hydrangeas, had a small tombstone on its side- with Fanny's name etched right onto it.

B-But... But I thought-

"Save us."

'You believed FANNY was your breaking point? Not at all, my dear. Your love for her is powerful... but there's something- or... someone... you've always held much closer. Someone you've come to value, just as much as yourself. Someone who's a little bit like you...'

A ghostly, scarlet-colored claw grasped at Bubble's chin, carefully turning her towards the direction of-

Book...?

"...She's got me.."

"Bubble..."

"BUBBLE!"

The angered tone stung like a wasp as it entered Bubble's 'ears'. Her eyes blinked, and her room faded back into her line of sight...

Wait...

Her room...?

Rubbing the exhaustion out of her eyes, Bubble jumped as a loud clang filled the room. The knife- one that she previously held- now

landed on the floor, it's blade aiming towards Fanny, who stood defensively with her tail hiding in-

No.

Horrified, the metallic soap bubble scurried back, slapping a hand over her mouth.

No- she wasn't- she swore that Fanny had been-

"B-Bubble-" Her girlfriend's voice spoke as clear as day, her creased eyebrows staying in their fixed position. "Bubble, breathe- i-it's just me. It's just a-"

"NO! NOOO!"

"BRACELETY! WAKE UP!"

"ICY! MY ICY!!!"

She was back...

'Well, good morning, my dearest little bellflower!~'

"Bracelety...!" Fanny whispered, scrambling out of the room.

Back to that night... the night where the zelatonin caught everybody off their guard...

The night where Book had run off...

'We have a LOT to begin!'

A frightened whine quivered past Bubble's panicked breaths. The silence became overpowered with dread, for she was unable to ease her racing heart. She clasped her hands, letting them open and close to regain any sense of control she longed for, and staggered out of the room, leaning against the walls as the screams bloomed one by one.

Flower's cries for Ruby. Fanny and Ice Cube's desperate consolements towards Bracelety.

"Book, we're here! We promise!"

"Look at us! BOOK!"

'Don't be so shocked," Scarlet scoffed, *'You knew what that Zelatonin was doing to you. I laid out a plan- and you're going to follow it.'*

Bubble didn't reply; she only stumbled forward, coming to a gradual stop in front of a familiar door. She struggled to hear what- or who- was on the other side at first, but she recognized the voices as they came to fruition.

"G... Guys...?"

"Book, are you okay? Look- I'm right here- Flower is, too.."

"Oh my word, I-.. I..."

"Shh... you're safe... It was just a nightmare..."

Just a nightmare.

All of this was just a nightmare.

Something broke inside of Bubble. A noise- one so alien- echoes in the back of her throat, threatening to spill into the air all around her. She crammed her hands over her mouth desperately, but to no avail- for the cackling erupted like an active volcano, capturing the unwanted attention of those within the home.

"Bubble..?" A disheveled pencil stepped out of her room, with a shivering match following close behind. "What are you doing...?"

After everything.

"Is she having another nightmare?!" Fanny's head poked from an open door, as she bolted down towards her girlfriend's side. "Hey- Bubb- speak to me!"

After the guilt. The pain. The suffering she endured for months.

"We have to get Golfball- this zelatonin shit is driving everyone INSANE!" Flower snapped, angrily hurling the bottle down the hallway.

She had to face it again. Oh, how she didn't want to- but here she stood.

"Bubble...?" The frail voice silenced all of Bubble's thoughts. Shivering, she glanced up, a pair of blue and green eyes appearing in her line of sight.

It couldn't be.

She was- No, Bubble remembered it as clear as day- the river, the rock, her-

"What's going on..?" Book asked wearily, stifling a yawn as she shook the sleepiness out of her head. The moment her eyes met Bubble's, her eyelids lifted- bitterness spiking in her soul. "Oh. It's-"

Bubble's muscles tensed up, a nauseating feeling squeezing the life out of her. She quickly scrambled onto her feet, making a mad dash out of the newly found clubhouse, much to her friends' dismay.

Their voices called to her; confused, startled, even a tad bit frustrated as to why the poor woman wasn't giving them any clarification. But there she ran, attempting to run, run away from it all, before it happened all over again.

"BUBBLE!" Fanny's voice came from a distance, but grew closer with every step. Now they ran after her; how couldn't they see that Bubble was trying to protect them?!

"Hey, Bubble~!" Scarlet greeted, clear as day. *"Are you running off somewhere? What's the fuss dear?"*

"Fuck you."

"Ah- what did I-"

"THE ZELATONIN- IT'S THE ZELATONIN!"

Stopping in her tracks, Bubble froze as she looked towards the voice. She saw Basketball, who frantically rushed across the street, hearing things that Bubble struggled to decipher. Her eyes, widened with a wild craze, a grief unspoken that had yet to process.

Of course. It was real. The fire happened- Grassy's murder took place. His blood still tainted her very hands, and when those orange pupils met Bubble's, the metallic object wheezed out in terror, stepping away as her hands raised out in defense.

"Bubble..?!" the sportsball asked, "A-Are you hearing things too?! Oh my court- we have to get to Golfball, NOW!"

"O-Oi'm- Oi'm sorry, oi-" Bubble's words erupted in a stutter, stepping away as Basketball approached her with concern- and a loud grunt was heard behind her.

How she regretted turning around to see who it was.

"FUCK!" A harsh, brutish yell snapped from the wooden block, as he stumbled back, hurriedly regaining his balance. His eyes, once filled with terror, now flickered with frustration, as he forcefully shoved Bubble out of his way. "WATCH WHERE YOU'RE FUCKING GOING, BUBBLE!"

Blocky.

All the words that Bubble wished to speak were now caught in a tornado of disbelief. She noted the anger in Blocky's posture, yet the hesitancy as his hands trembled with unease, as he rushed towards Basketball's side, flinching at- what she assumed was- a hallucination.

"Bubble, please be careful!" Basketball spoke out, trying to juggle both keeping Blocky close and keeping the Zelatonin fiasco in check. She looked around, watching as objects were frightened out of their nightly slumber, desperately leaving their homes to get some help from the scientist behind the medicine.

"A-Ah- HAH-" Bubble was turning pale, looking down at the small figure, who innocently looked up at her, blinking.

Oh. She almost forgot about this.

She murdered a small child. Their child. Baked his remains into a fancy treat too.

And not too long after, she murdered his 'father'. The sound of the

blender struggling to cut through skull and layers upon layers of flesh and muscle rang in Bubble's mind as she stared at Blocky, who quickly guided the others alongside Basketball.

And she could finally do it again-

"NOOO!!" A scream. *Bubble's* scream. The poor thing no longer even tried to hide it anymore; she panicked, she ran, not caring where she ran off to. She wept as the crowd of objects rushed by, confused as to where the soap bubble was wandering off to.

But they didn't care for long. The situation with the experimental drug was all they could think about- but for Bubble, all that quaked in her mind was the blood that laid in her hands.

Did it happen?

"Oh- well excuse you, Bubble!" Pillow yelped, jumping out of Bubble's path.

Did she kill them before?

"Wh-Where could Saw and Gaty be," Lollipop's words wisped by Bubble's 'ears', as she watched the object lean against Taco for support.

Was this real?

"PEOPLE- PEOPLE, PLEASE!" Golfball assuaged the panicked crowd, trying to ease their panicked minds.

Was she real? Was Scarlet ever fucking real?

Why wasn't she TALKING-

Bubble curled up in a corner, hugging her own metallic body. This wasn't real. It couldn't be. She couldn't have hurt people. This couldn't be true at all-

"Hey. It is true and you should fucking know it."

Bubble's eyes widened at the voice, and her fears were confirmed.

"C'mon! You know what I need here- I have a garden to tend to! Don't you know what I laid out for you? Or is it your type of object being as brainless as they say they w-"

"THERE YOU ARE!" Bubble flinched at the sound of Fanny's voice, peeking through her covered face to see her girlfriend running in her direction. Behind her, a few of the others followed, concern plastered over their exhausted faces.

Yet, the moment Fanny's tail reached towards Bubble, the woman swiped it away with a shriek.

"D-DON'T!" she cried, "DON'T TOUCH ME!"

"What?! Bubble, y-you ran off- you're having another nightmare!"

"JUST GET AWAY FROM ME!"

"We're here, I promise you- you don't have to-"

"YOU WERE DEAD!"

Startled, Fanny's tail flinched back, slowly lowering to her side. "I-...What?!"

"Y-You were dead- oill of you, oi-" Bubble stammered through sobs, frantically pointing towards the growing crowd. "OI THOUGHT THEY WERE OILL DEAD!"

"Bubble, you're experiencing a hallucination." Carefully, Basketball stepped forward, keeping the crowd a fair distance away.

"IT'S NOT A HALLUCINATION! OI SAW IT! OILL OF IT!!"

Now it was Freesmarts turn to step in. Match, who had finally come to after her blind moment of panic, kneeled down to Bubble's level. "Bubbs, nobody's, like, dead... We're right here with you-"

"Oi know they're dead. T-Tree. Snowball. Grassy Balloony Saw Gaty- T-They're all goine."

Silence. The names triggered a reaction from the crowd- with a few

objects shakily walking in Bubble's direction, now eager to know if she had seen something.

Or, even better- knew something about their missing loved ones.

But to the others, this was news. Bitter news, at that. For Golfball looked up at Basketball, now confused at the frightened look on the other woman's face.

"Basketball?" she asked, her voice reduced to a whisper. "What is she talking about?"

The orange sports ball swallowed with unease. "Y-You- none of you were supposed to know-"

"Know what..?! What is Bubble talking about- is that why Grassy's been GONE FOR SO LONG?!"

"Do you know where Tree could be..?!" Bottle whispered, her head turning in Bubble's direction.

"Or Balloony?!" Cloudy asked, flying over her. "Come on- y-you said you saw them!"

As the voices overwhelmed her, Bubble clasped her hands over her 'ears', a tormented frown scrunching on her face. She didn't want to say it- she knew what'd happen if this confession left her mouth- yet, being met with the faces of the friends and family of those she killed, crushed her with overpowering guilt.

She knew where they were. But if one word slipped...

Oh.

"Hey- LAY OFF HER!" Fanny barked, protectively standing in front of her girlfriend with her tail shielding her from the crowd. "She's just having a NIGHTMARE! I HATE prying at people for answers- just let her BREATHE!"

"B-But she said she knew where those objects went!" Leafy shouted, now trembling with unease. "Do you think she knows where Coiny is?!"

Coiny.

Wait.

"What do you mean?!" Fries uttered in confusion. "Wasn't he with you?!"

"No! W-We checked his room- we thought he was with YOU!"

There.

With a steady motion, Bubble lifted herself from the ground, taking in every last face that painted across her vision. The energy swirling around them felt like a warning- yet, a chance for salvation; to be spared from the worst fate imaginable.

"Oi know what happened to them," Bubble announced, wiping the tears that rolled down her tired face. "And oi know WHO took them away."

Any attempt at assuaging the crowd became hopeless. Nearly everyone rushed in a wave of desperation towards Bubble, aching to know what they did not.

But no words were needed. Slowly, Bubble turned to face the forest, her pointer finger aiming towards its darkened path.

"There."

'WHERE ARE YOU GOING?!'

The Forest.

'THEY'RE ALL FOLLOWING YOU- YOU'RE GIVING YOURSELF AWAY, DAMMIT!'

No. I'm just being the Hero they've always seen me as.

'HOW?!'

Easy.

You have the plan, right?

Why not get rid of her first. Make them think the problem is solved.

Leave them searching. While YOU take care of the rest.

'....This will require TOO much from me. The only way I'd be able to achieve this is by-'

Taking control over my body.

'...And you aren't-'

Afraid? No.

Just as long as this can be over with.

Just as long as I can get this over with.

'...I like the way you think, Bubble. I say it often... But I always knew you'd be the perfect vessel for my precious garden~'

The cave was much more peaceful at night.

Having brought Pin some extra snacks, Coiny was enthralled to spend some more time with his girlfriend. There was so much they had to do- sure, it may not have been the way they'd imagined it- but that doesn't mean it'd never be a possibility!

So here he was!

...Sleeping.

He had lost track of time- sure. But he longed for the comfort of Pin's arms, knowing that with a single turn of his head, she'd be right by his side. No need to grieve over the safety of their room- her slumbering face looked as beautiful as ever beneath the twinkling stars of the sky, after all.

There was a time where Coiny wanted to ignore the cruel past. Knowing what Pin had done, his aching heart yearned for some form of obsoletion, rather than forgetting about the one he had fallen in love with so long ago.

He truly didn't want to believe that it wasn't Pin's doing. And, after the incident at the LIVE Hotel- his wish was granted.

Surprisingly, things weren't too difficult to return to. Every night, rain or shine, the coin creature made his way down the newly made path of his- one where his girlfriend waited at. He scavenged the city for food and water to bring, sometimes snatching any from the kitchen he now shared.

Sorry Leafy.

NOT sorry, Firey.

Sprawled amongst a soft, mossy patch of earth, Coiny's snores echoed throughout the walls of the cave. It had been a long day back in the city- for every hour he spent away was nothing short but grueling.

Feeling her shift, Coiny yawned, carefully pulling her closer into his arms as he snuggled into her warmth. Even in her sleep, Pin smiled at the feeling, draping a careful arm over him and caressing the back of his head.

Such a tender hold, neither of them couldn't let go of. They slept, letting the ambience of the forest lull them into peace.

....

Footsteps.

....

"Look over there!"

...

"No WAY."

...

"I-It's them!"

The voices sent chills down Pin's spine- this time, her arm reached down to grab Coiny's arms, unease fueling the adrenaline that soared through her veins. She waited, letting the seconds tick by...

Snap.

"Coiny," Pin whispered, shaking the coin creature from his sleep. "Coiny, wake up-"

Groaning, Coiny wrapped his arms around her own, snuggling right on the top of it. "Mhh... Five more minutes..."

"Shh- get up already! Don't you hear that?!"

"Hear the voice... of an angel..? Yeah... I hear her alright..."

"No! Get up, I- I think there's someone-"

"GET HER!"

In a blind panic, Pin recognized the sound of Leafy's voice. All of their voices. A stinging uproar that echoed within the walls of the cave followed by the indignant disparagement from the objects she had once come to know.

Leafy. Fries. Golfball, and Tennis Ball. One by one, they stampeded into the cave, a web of hands pushing inwards as they snatched the two lovers away.

"COINY!" Pin shrieked, now trapped in the noose of hands that bound her tightly. She did everything she could to free herself, kicking, thrashing, even threatening to bite the arms that held her, but Blocky broke no sweat. He forced her arms back, hoisting her out of the cave and slamming the side of her face against the jagged wall.

Once Coiny heard the impact, he clawed his way onto his feet, running after the two. "PIN-"

"OH NO YOU DON'T!" A pair of hands clasped around the coin creature, forcefully yanking him back and entrapping him in an iron grip. Coiny made out the voice- snarling as he struggled to loosen his grip.

"FRIES," he shouted, "YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND, PIN IS-"

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" Fries yelled, seething with rage. "You ran off- you recovered that MONSTER, AND RAN OFF WITH HER?!"

"NO! NO! L-LISTEN, SHE HASN'T DONE ANYTHING-"

"LIAR!" Now it was Puffball's turn to yell. "THERE'S A REASON THESE MURDERS ARE HAPPENING AGAIN!"

"AGAIN?! PIN-" Coiny turned to find his lover, only to be met with the sight of her head being slammed against the wall of the cave. "PIN!"

Any attempt to free himself proved to be futile. One after the other, the two star-crossed lovers were conveyed out of the cave, where Blocky dragged the thumbtack in front of the crowd, yanking her head upwards.

"That was for my son," he uttered in disgust. "And this is for SNOWBALL!"

He drove his foot right into her side, forcing a wheeze out of her. She keeled over on the ground, yet any relief from the pain wasn't going to slide by Blocky- for he forcefully pulled her upwards, letting her take in the angered crowd that had stormed her safe haven.

"YOU SICK FREAK!" Taco shouted. "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO OUR FRIENDS?!"

"I LOST EVERYONE BECAUSE OF YOU," Basketball screamed, being held back by an anxious Tennis Ball.

"I've searched everywhere," Bottle whispered, her eyes narrowing at

the thumbtack. "It was all because of you..."

As the world screamed into her face, she thought of what awaited her next. A punishment so severe. Torture. And then, execution. Having to take in cruel goodbyes from every object that stood in her face.

But it wasn't this that scared her. No- it was the terror of wondering what Coiny's fate would be. The prospect of having to say goodbye- a permanent goodbye- once more, to leave the man who maintained a hold on her heart, brought tears into the thumbtacks eyes.

She's done for.

Trembling, she kicked her leg to wriggle free, and the movement was met by a fearful cry from the crowd. Their anger fueled them throughout the night, but at the sight of an irate, despicable killer? There was no chance they'd get too cocky now.

But the sudden cry of fear made an instinct in Bubble switch. She barreled her way through the crowd, hearing the pleas of help from her friends. She ignored the objects that stepped aside, creating a clear path for her to approach the thumbtack, her vision landing on none other than that poor unfortunate Pin, frozen in fear at the realization that she had been caught. It seemed this was the moment of revenge- as the frightened crowd began to cheer quietly at the sight of their hero.

Hero.

The former vessel, hm?

Here we are.

Whilst Bubble stared down at the thumbtack, an angered Leafy approached her, giving her a gentle nudge. "You're strong," she uttered. "You've done it before- put an end to this."

Menacingly, the lemon leaf pulled a knife out of seemingly thin air, holding it in front of the other object.

They all hid behind her- and here she was once again.

Back in that dreaded position everyone wanted Bubble to be in- what everyone designated her to be after she fought back.

No.. not back at poor unfortunate Pin.

At Scarlet.

Slipping away from the cheering crowd, Bubble grabbed the knife from Leafy's hand and turned towards the thumbtack with a blank stare. Everyone is cheering her on, calling out for her help to aid in the vengeance of this monster that was now a few feet away from them, but their shouting screeches like nails on a chalkboard- overwhelming her to the point where tears glossed over her line of sight.

This was the last thing she wanted to do. The dream was much worse- but if she didn't do anything now, none of them might never make it to see the future.

"NO!" Coiny wept, angrily thrashing in Fries's hold, "YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO HER!"

"We can- and we WILL," Golfball jeered, calmly nodding in Bubble's direction. "It's about time we put an end to this mess- once and for all."

There's a wave of exhilaration that washes amongst the crowd- clapping and hollering destroying the hush of the night, as Bubble approached Pin with careful steps. The thumbtack's legs nearly gave in at the sight, a terrified gasp breaking past her mouth whilst she struggled to plead with Bubble. Even the sight of the blade glistening against the moonlight made her eyes twitch, nearly passing out from fear until the adrenaline shoved her right back into consciousness.

Lifting the blade into the air, Pin let out a frightened scream, much to the other's enjoyment.

"GO ON, BUBBLE!" Pencil cheered, her arms gleefully wrapping around Match. "KILL HER!"

"MAKE HER SUFFER," Blocky sneered, tightening his hands around Pin's limbs with a hard yank. "MAKE HER FEEL THE PAIN!"

"BE A HERO!" Flower shouted.

"OUR HERO!" Ruby added.

One by one, the word looped around Bubble's mind, constricting her like a tightening noose.

"GO BUBBLE!"

"COME ON!"

"YOU CAN DO IT!"

"KILL HER!"

"WE ALWAYS KNEW WE COULD COUNT ON YOU!"

Kill.

"SAVE US ALL!"

Kill.

"BE OUR HERO!"

...

Hero.

She knows what she has to do.

Glancing to the side, Bubble's fingers readjust their grip on the knife's handle, her arm lifting above her head.

Let me be the hero they've needed me to be.

'Bubble-'

With trembling hands, Bubble swung the blade down. Pin's eyes shut, awaiting the impact...

...Until the sound of a broken gasp caught her by surprise.

The knife, now plunged into Bubble's throat, was speared deeper into her trachea, blood drooling down her metallic body.

At the impact, Scarlet let out an unfamiliar screech- one that damned the poor woman's eardrums into a sense of Hell. '*NOO!!*'

Everybody's cheering stopped at the sight, as Bubble forcefully dragged the knife across her throat, making a poor attempt at decapitating her own head. The more she dug the blade into her flesh, the more the wound grinned at the world, revealing her twitching vocal chords and her spasming muscles.

'NOO- NO, NO NO! ***WHAT HAVE YOU DOOONE?!"*** Her voice amplified, no longer recognizable as the mere, snarky guide that led Bubble down this path- but instead, a monstrosity.

A nauseating crunch echoed throughout the forest, and Pin stood in her spot, not knowing what to do, how to breathe, how Bubble was still standing. Her bones quaked with terror as the stench of blood struck her, and even as Blocky's grip loosened from her arms, the sudden flash of red made her jump.

And for the first time, she wasn't the only one who noticed it.

Every thrust of the knife resulted in another gag from the metallic soap bubble. Carving deep into her flesh, a scarlet-hued mist rose from the ashes of her blood, a demonic screech flooding into the nightly atmosphere.

All the anticipation now silenced into shock, as the crowd watched the mist stretch into the cold air; an aura so striking, it caused a few of the objects to cower beneath its wickedness.

Especially for Freesmart- for the final girls all captured the absence of the thumbtack, seeing nothing more than evil in those eyes of hers. As the roars amplified, Bracelety shoved Ice Cube behind her defensively; Pencil and Match held each other as their faces dawned with the aura from the mist.

Although she had glared from the sidelines, jealous that she, once again, was there to save the day, Book now watched with her hands

hovering over her mouth, a static-like hush filling her soul.

And for the first time, her heart ached. For that was her friend.

That's when the face came into view.

A hellish, ghastly face- one that was difficult to take in- slowly bloomed into the uncanny shape of a marigold, its jaw unhinging as its screech violently echoed for miles beyond.

"BUBBLE!" Fanny choked out, fighting the sob that swelled in the center of her throat. She tried to rush to her side, but as the ghostly marigold shot in her direction, she shrieked, falling onto her side with a hard thud.

And for a moment- she swore she saw Bubble, laying dead in the garden- in the position that she had first found her in.

Next to her, Golfball's jaw dropped, the reflection of the marigold twinkling on the surface of her glasses. She wasn't sure what to make of this- a hallucination? A vision? Some sort of-

"PIN!"

Coiny's frightened yell snapped the scientist free from her thoughts, and to her horror, the mist began to swirl at the top of Pin's head. Panicked, Blocky tossed the thumbtack in its direction, in an attempt to avoid the wrath of the being that now burned brightly against the darkness.

'So... you want to play the 'Hero', don't you?!'

A red claw drove Bubble's wrist deeper into her throat.

'You think you can save all your little friends from becoming PLANT FERTILIZER?!'

Twisting the blade, she ripped it out; a piece of Bubble's flesh launched straight onto Pin's face.

'Well guess what. THAT'S NOT HOW THINGS WORK AROUND HERE- LET'S SEE WHERE YOUR HEROISM GETS YOU, ***BUBBLE!'***

As the mist grew brighter and harsher, Pin shook her head, desperately reaching towards the others. She cried out for help, her voice becoming more strained as the mist constricted her airways- much to the crowds dismay. Their eyes, now flooded with confusion and fear, knew nothing of what this voice was- or where it was coming from.

Wincing, Coiny tried to shove his way through the blinding light, his arm outstretched to take a hold of Pin's. He followed the sound of her panicked screams, clenching his teeth to fight his way through.

"GRAB MY HAND!" he shouted. "PIN-"

"COINY, GET AWAY FROM THAT THING!" Fries screamed, snatching the smaller object back.

"FRIES, SHE NEEDS OUR HELP! PIN NEEDS OUR-"

"THAT'S NOT PIN ANYMORE."

One final blow, and Bubble collapsed, the knife falling into the puddle of blood that formed below her. The hollowness in her eyes faded as the mist left her body, leaving behind nothing more than a clear picture of regret.

Yet, as the others tried to help, Golfball forced them back, not wanting anyone to get near the distorted mist that twisted endlessly above their heads. Pin's screams morphed into pained gagging, choking on the devilish atmosphere as her eyes rolled into the back of her head. The marigold's fumes slithered into Pin's body, neatly wrapping itself around her much like the strings on a marionette, her sinister cackling falling beneath a slumbering silence.

And then, nothing.

"P-Pin...?" Fries whispered, his hand reaching for her without knowing.

Dazed, the thumbtack swept herself back onto her feet.

"Pin- say something!"

...

"Missed me?~"

With a giggle that was no longer of her own, Pin reached over, grabbing the bloodied knife, and turning back to face the crowd. There was no time to nurse the shock that left the others in a stupored mess, because the moment she turned to look at them, the familiar, corrupted grin that stretched across her face made their scrambled thoughts click.

It was never Pin.

"So," the thumbtack snickered, aiming the blade at the crowd. "Who's ***FIRST***."

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this chapter was 14,145 words. there was no way i was gonna split it- no sir, not today. i am TIRED.

anyways, uh. HI. guess who's BAAACK. I've had this vessel twist planned since the very beginning- so we are officially making our way towards the final stretch (as in... the next half of this book).

This took FOREVER TO WRITE. not only did i get sick, but i also went through a low (currently feeling better!!). AND RUMOR HAS IT THERE'S GONNA BE ANOTHER OSC MEETUP THIS YEAR. I'll be going to the NYC one again, most likely on a saturday if that's the date that they choose :]

also. just a heads up- the user who's been stalking me is back. he now goes my tempmintfreeze on the internet archive- and he's been saying some really concerning things, so there's a slight chance i might lay low once again! I really don't want to, but I'm really disturbed by this guy. If everyone could report him again, it'd be really appreciated- because I'm tired of feeling paranoid every time I post. (i'll post the link here for everyone: https://archive.org/details/statement_202503)

ok... i think that's all I have to say. hopefully i'll talk to everyone again soon!

byeeee

-ice